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WOOD MAGIC.

WOOD MAGIC;

A Fable.

BY

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WOOD MAGIC.

CHAPTER I.

SIR BEVIS.

ONE morning as little "Sir" Bevis [such was his pet name] was digging in the farmhouse garden, he saw a daisy, and throwing aside his spade, he sat down on the grass to pick the flower to pieces. He pulled the pink-tipped petals off one by one, and as they dropped they were lost. Next he gathered a bright dandelion, and squeezed the white juice from the hollow stem, which drying presently, left his fingers stained with brown spots. Then he drew forth a bennet from its sheath, and bit and sucked it till his teeth were green from the sap. Lying at full length, he drummed the earth with his toes, while the tall grass blades tickled his cheeks.

Presently, rolling on his back, he drummed again with his heels. He looked up at the blue sky, but

only for a moment, because the glare of light was too strong in his eyes. After a minute, he turned on his side, thrust out one arm, placed his head on it, and drew up one knee, as if going to sleep. His little brown wrist, bared by the sleeve shortening as he extended his arm, bent down the grass, and his still browner fingers played with the blades, and every now and then tore one off.

A flutter of wings sounded among the blossom on an apple-tree close by, and instantly Bevis sat up, knowing it must be a goldfinch thinking of building a nest in the branches. If the trunk of the tree had not been so big, he would have tried to climb it at once, but he knew he could not do it, nor could he see the bird for the leaves and bloom. A puff of wind came and showered the petals down upon him; they fell like snowflakes on his face and dotted the grass.

Buzz! A great humble-bee, with a band of red gold across his back, flew up, and hovered near, wavering to and fro in the air as he stayed to look at a flower.

Buzz! Bevis listened, and knew very well what he was saying. It was, "This is a sweet little

garden, my darling; a very pleasant garden; all grass and daisies, and apple-trees, and narrow patches with flowers and fruit-trees one side, and a wall and currant-bushes another side, and a low box-hedge and a haha, where you can see the high mowing grass quite underneath you; and a round summer-house in the corner, painted as blue inside as a hedge-sparrow's egg is outside; and then another haha with iron railings, which you are always climbing up, Bevis, on the fourth side, with stone steps leading down to a meadow, where the cows are feeding, and where they have left all the buttercups standing as tall as your waist, sir. The gate in the iron railings is not fastened, and besides, there is a gap in the box-hedge, and it is easy to drop down the haha wall, but that is mowing grass there. You know very well you could not come to any harm in the meadow; they said you were not to go outside the garden, but that's all nonsense, and very stupid. *I* am going outside the garden, Bevis. Good morning, dear." Buzz! And the great humble-bee flew slowly between the iron railings, out among the buttercups, and away up the field.

Bevis went to the railings, and stood on the lowest bar; then he opened the gate a little way, but it squeaked so loud upon its rusty hinges that he let it shut again. He walked round the garden along beside the box-hedge to the patch by the lilac trees; they were single lilacs, which are much more beautiful than the double, and all bowed down with a mass of bloom. Some rhubarb grew there, and to bring it up the faster, they had put a round wooden box on it, hollowed out from the sawn butt of an elm, which was rotten within and easily scooped. The top was covered with an old board, and every time that Bevis passed he lifted up the corner of the board and peeped in, to see if the large red, swelling knobs were yet bursting.

One of these round wooden boxes had been split and spoilt, and half of it was left lying with the hollow part downwards. Under this shelter a Toad had his house. Bevis peered in at him, and touched him with a twig to make him move an inch or two, for he was so lazy, and sat there all day long, except when it rained. Sometimes the Toad told him a story, but not very often, for he was a silent old philosopher, and not very fond of any-

body. He had a nephew, quite a lively young fellow, in the cucumber frame on the other side of the lilac bushes, at whom Bevis also peered nearly every day after they had lifted the frame and propped it up with wedges.

The gooseberries were no bigger than beads, but he tasted two, and then a thrush began to sing on an ash-tree in the hedge of the meadow. "Bevis! Bevis!" said the thrush, and he turned round to listen: "My dearest Bevis, have you forgotten the meadow, and the buttercups, and the sorrel? You know the sorrel, don't you, that tastes so pleasant if you nibble the leaf? And I have a nest in the bushes, not very far up the hedge, and you may take just one egg; there are only two yet. But don't tell any more boys about it, or we shall not have one left. That is a very sweet garden, but it is very small. I like all these fields to fly about in, and the swallows fly ever so much farther than I can; so far away and so high, that I cannot tell you how they find their way home to the chimney. But they will tell you, if you ask them. Good morning! *I* am going over the brook."

Bevis went to the iron railings and got up two

bars, and looked over; but he could not yet make up his mind, so he went inside the summer-house, which had one small round window. All the lower part of the blue walls was scribbled and marked with pencil, where he had written and drawn, and put down his ideas and notes. The lines were somewhat intermingled, and crossed each other, and some stretched out long distances, and came back in sharp angles. But Bevis knew very well what he meant when he wrote it all. Taking a stump of cedar pencil from his pocket, one end of it much gnawn, he added a few scrawls to the inscriptions, and then stood on the seat to look out of the round window, which was darkened by an old cob-web.

Once upon a time there was a very cunning spider—a very cunning spider indeed. The old Toad by the rhubarb told Bevis there had not been such a cunning spider for many summers; he knew almost as much about flies as the old Toad, and caught such a great number, that the Toad began to think there would be none left for him. Now the Toad was extremely fond of flies, and he watched the spider with envy, and grew more angry about it every day.

As he sat blinking and winking by the rhubarb in his house all day long, the Toad never left off thinking, thinking, thinking about this spider. And as he kept thinking, thinking, thinking, so he told Bevis, he recollected that he knew a great deal about a good many other things besides flies. So one day, after several weeks of thinking, he crawled out of his house in the sunshine, which he did not like at all, and went across the grass to the iron railings, where the spider had then got his web. The spider saw him coming, and being very proud of his cleverness, began to taunt and tease him.

"Your back is all over warts, and you are an old toad," he said. "You are so old, that I heard the swallows saying their great, great, great grandmothers, when they built in the chimney, did not know when you were born. And you have got foolish, and past doing anything, and so stupid that you hardly know when it is going to rain. Why, the sun is shining bright, you stupid old toad, and there isn't a chance of a single drop falling. You look very ugly down there in the grass. Now, don't you wish that you were me,

and could catch more flies than you could eat? Why, I can catch wasps and bees, and tie them up so tight with my threads that they cannot sting nor even move their wings, nor so much as wriggle their bodies. I am the very cleverest and most cunning spider that ever lived."

"Indeed, you are," replied the Toad. "I have been thinking so all the summer; and so much do I admire you, that I have come all this way, across in the hot sun, to tell you something."

"Tell *me* something!" said the spider, much offended. "*I* know everything."

"Oh, yes, honoured sir," said the Toad; "you have such wonderful eyes, and such a sharp mind, it is true that you know everything about the sun, and the moon, and the earth, and flies. But, as you have studied all these great and important things, you could hardly see all the very little trifles like a poor old toad."

"Oh yes, I can. I know everything — everything!"

"But, sir," went on the Toad so humbly, "this is such a little—such a very little — thing, and a spider like you in such a high position of life,

could not mind me telling you such a mere nothing."

"Well, I don't mind," said the spider — "you may go on, and tell me, if you like."

"The fact is," said the Toad, "while I have been sitting in my hole, I have noticed that such a lot of the flies that come into this garden presently go into the summer-house there, and when they are in the summer-house, they always go to that little round window, which is sometimes quite black with them; for it is the nature of flies to buzz over glass."

"I do not know so much about that," said the spider; "for I have never lived in houses, being an independent insect; but it is possible you may be right. At any rate, it is not of much consequence. You had better go up into the window, old toad." Now this was a sneer on the part of the spider.

"But I can't climb up into the window," said the Toad; "all I can do is to crawl about the ground, but you can run up a wall quickly. How I do wish I was a spider, like you. Oh, dear!" And then the Toad turned round, after

bowing to the clever spider, and went back to his hole.

Now the spider was secretly very much mortified and angry with himself, because he had not noticed this about the flies going to the window in the summer-house. At first he said to himself that it was not true; but he could not help looking that way now and then, and every time he looked, there was the window crowded with flies. They had all the garden to buzz about in, and all the fields, but instead of wandering under the trees, and over the flowers, they preferred to go into the summer-house and crawl over the glass of the little window, though it was very dirty from so many feet. For a long time, the spider was too proud to go there too; but one day such a splendid blue-bottle fly got in the window and made such a tremendous buzzing, that he could not resist it any more.

So he left his web by the railings, and climbed up the blue-painted wall, over Bevis's writings and marks, and spun such a web in the window as had never before been seen. It was the largest and the finest, and the most beautifully-arranged web

that had ever been made, and it caught such a number of flies that the spider grew fatter every day. In a week's time he was so big that he could no longer hide in the crack he had chosen, he was quite a giant; and the Toad came across the grass one night and looked at him, but the spider was now so bloated he would not recognise the Toad.

But one morning a robin came to the iron railings, and perched on the top, and put his head a little on one side, to show his black eye the better. Then he flew inside the summer-house, alighted in the window, and gobbled up the spider in an instant. The old Toad shut his eye and opened it again, and went on thinking, for that was just what he knew would happen. Ever so many times in his very long life he had seen spiders go up there, but no sooner had they got fat than a robin or a wren came in and ate them. Some of the clever spider's web was there still when Bevis looked out of the window, all dusty and draggled, with the skins and wings of some gnats and a dead leaf entangled in it.

As he looked, a white butterfly came along the

meadow, and instantly he ran out, flung open the gate, rushed down the steps, and taking no heed of the squeak the gate made as it shut behind him, raced after the butterfly.

The tall buttercups brushed his knees, and bent on either side as if a wind was rushing through them. A bennet slipped up his knickerbockers and tickled his leg. His toes only touched the ground, neither his heels nor the hollow of his foot; and from so light a pressure the grass, bowed but not crushed, rose up, leaving no more mark of his passage than if a grasshopper had gone by.

Daintily fanning himself with his wings, the butterfly went before Bevis, not yet knowing that he was chased, but sauntering along just above the buttercups. He peeped as he flew under the lids of the flowers' eyes, to see if any of them loved him. There was a glossy green leaf which he thought he should like to feel, it looked so soft and satin-like. So he alighted on it, and then saw Bevis coming, his hat on the very back of his head, and his hand stretched out to catch him. The butterfly wheeled himself round on the leaf, shut up his wings, and seemed so innocent,

till Bevis fell on his knee, and then under his fingers there was nothing but the leaf. His cheek flushed, his eye lit up, and away he darted again after the butterfly, which had got several yards ahead before he could recover himself. He ran now faster than ever.

"Race on," said the buttercups; "race on, Bevis; that butterfly disdains us because we are so many, and all alike."

"Be quick," said a great moon-daisy to him; "catch him, dear. I asked him to stay and tell me a story, but he would not."

"Never mind me," said the clover; "you may step on me if you like, love."

"But just look at me for a moment, pet, as you go by," cried the purple vetch by the hedge.

A colt in the field seeing Bevis running so fast, thought he too must join the fun, so he whisked his tail, stretched his long floundering legs, and galloped away. Then the mare whinnied and galloped too, and the ground shook under her heavy hoofs. The cows lifted their heads from gathering the grass close round the slender bennets, and wondered why any one could be so foolish as to

rush about, when there was plenty to eat and no hurry.

The cunning deceitful butterfly, so soon as Bevis came near, turned aside and went along a furrow. Bevis running in the furrow, caught his foot in the long creepers of the crowfoot, and fell down bump, and pricked his hand with a thistle. Up he jumped again, red as a peony, and shouting in his rage, ran on so quickly that he nearly overtook the butterfly. But they were now nearer the other hedge. The butterfly, frightened at the shouting and Bevis's resolution, rose over the brambles, and Bevis stopping short flung his hat at him. The hat did not hit the butterfly, but the wind it made puffed him round, and so frightened him, that he flew up half as high as the elms, and went into the next field.

When Bevis looked down, there was his hat, hung on a branch of ash, far beyond his reach. He could not touch the lowest leaf, jump as much as he would. His next thought was a stone to throw, but there were none in the meadow. Then he put his hand in his jacket pocket for his knife, to cut a long stick. It was not in that pocket,

nor in the one on the other side, nor in his knickers. Now the knife was Bevis's greatest treasure—his very greatest. He looked all round bewildered, and the tears rose in his eyes.

Just then Pan, the spaniel, who had worked his head loose from the collar and followed him, ran out of the hedge between Bevis's legs with such joyful force, that Bevis was almost overthrown, and burst into a fit of laughter. Pan ran back into the hedge to hunt, and Bevis, with tears rolling down his cheeks into the dimples made by his smiles, dropped on hands and knees and crept in after the dog under the briars. On the bank there was a dead grey stick, a branch that had fallen from the elms. It was heavy, but Bevis heaved it up, and pushed it through the boughs and thrust his hat off.

Creeping out again, he put it on, and remembering his knife, walked out into the field to search for it. When Pan missed him, he followed, and presently catching scent of a rabbit, the spaniel rushed down a furrow, which happened to be the very furrow where Bevis had tumbled. Going after Pan, Bevis found his knife in the grass, where it

had dropped when shaken from his pocket by the jerk of his fall. He opened the single blade it contained at once, and went back to the hedge to cut a stick. As he walked along the hedge, he thought the briar was too prickly to cut, and the thorn was too hard, and the ash was too big, and the willow had no knob, and the elder smelt so strong, and the sapling oak was across the ditch, and out of reach, and the maple had such rough bark. So he wandered along a great way through that field and the next, and presently saw a nut-tree stick that promised well, for the sticks grew straight, and not too big.

He jumped into the ditch, climbed half up the mound, and began to cut away at one of the rods, leaning his left arm on the moss-grown stole. The bark was easily cut through, and he soon made a notch, but then the wood seemed to grow harder, and the chips he got out were very small. The harder the wood, the more determined Bevis became, and he cut and worked away with such force that his chest heaved, his brow was set and frowning, and his jacket all green from rubbing against the hazel. Suddenly something passed be-

tween him and the light. He looked up, and there was Pan, whom he had forgotten, in the hedge looking down at him. "Pan! Pan!" cried Bevis. Pan wagged his tail, but ran back, and Bevis, forsaking his stick, scrambled up into the stole, then into the mound, and through a gap into the next field. Pan was nowhere to be seen.

There was a large mossy root under a great oak, and, hot with his cutting, Bevis sat down upon it. Along came a house martin, the kind of swallow that has a white band across his back, flying very low, and only just above the grass. The swallow flew to and fro not far from Bevis, who watched it, and presently asked him to come closer. But the swallow said, "I shall not come any nearer, Bevis. Don't you remember what you did last year, sir? Don't you remember Bill, the carters' boy, put a ladder against the wall, and you climbed up the ladder, and put your paw, all brown and dirty, into my nest and took my eggs? And you tried to string them on a bennet, but the bennet was too big, so you went indoors for some thread. And you made my wife and me dreadfully unhappy, and we

said we would never come back any more to your house, Bevis."

"But you have come back, swallow."

"Yes, we have come back—just once more; but if you do it again we shall go away for ever."

"But I won't do it again; no, that I won't! Do come near."

So the swallow came a little nearer, only two yards away, and flew backwards and forwards, and Bevis could hear the snap of his beak as he caught the flies.

"Just a little bit nearer still," said he. "Let me stroke your lovely white back."

"Oh, no, I can't do that. I don't think you are quite safe, Bevis. Why don't you gather the cowslips?"

Bevis looked up and saw that the field was full of cowslips — yellow with cowslips. "I will pick every one," said he, "and carry them all back to my mother."

"You cannot do that," said the swallow, laughing, "you will not try long enough."

"I *hate* you!" cried Bevis in a passion, and flung his knife, which was in his hand, at the bird.

The swallow rose up, and the knife whizzed by and struck the ground.

"I told you you were not safe," said the swallow over his head; "and I am sure you won't pick half the cowslips."

Bevis picked up his knife and put it in his pocket; then he began to gather the cowslips, and kept on for a quarter of an hour as fast as ever he could, till both hands were full. There was a rustle in the hedge, and looking up he saw Pan come out, all brown with sand sticking to his coat. He shook himself, and sent the sand flying from him in a cloud, just like he did with the water when he came up out of the pond. Then he looked at Bevis, wagged his tail, cried "yowp!" and ran back into the hedge again.

Bevis rushed to the spot, and saw that there was a large rabbits' hole. Into this hole Pan had worked his way so far that there was nothing of him visible but his hind legs and tail. Bevis could hear him panting in the hole, he was working so hard to get at the rabbit, and tearing with his teeth at the roots to make the hole bigger. Bevis clapped his hands, dropping his cowslips, and called "Loo!

Loo!" urging the dog on. The sand came flying out behind Pan, and he worked harder and harder, as if he would tear the mound to pieces.

Bevis sat down on the grass under the shadow of the oak, by a maple bush, and taking a cowslip, began to count the spots inside it. It was always five in all the cowslips—five brown little spots—that he was sure of, because he knew he had five fingers on each hand. He lay down at full length on his back, and looked up at the sky through the boughs of the oak. It was very very blue, and very near down. With a long ladder he knew he could have got up there easily, and it looked so sweet. "Sky," said Bevis, "I love you like I love my mother." He pouted his lips, and kissed at it. Then turning a little on one side to watch Pan, in an instant he fell firm asleep.

Pan put his head out of the hole to breathe two or three times, and looked aside at Bevis, and seeing that he was still, went back to work again. Two butterflies came fluttering along together. The swallow returned, and flew low down along the grass near Bevis. The wind came now and then, and shook down a shower of white and pink petals from

a crab-tree in the hedge. By and by a squirrel climbing from tree to tree reached the oak, and stayed to look at Bevis beneath in the shadow. He knew exactly how Bevis felt—just like he did himself when he went to sleep.

CHAPTER II.

AT HOME.

"Yowp, yow; wow-wow!" The yelling of Pan woke Bevis, who jumped up, and seeing the Bailiff beating the spaniel with a stick, instantly, and without staying the tenth of a second to rub his eyes or stretch himself, rushed at the man and hit him with his doubled fists. As if he had seen it in his sleep, Bevis understood what was taking place immediately his eye-lids opened. So the Bailiff beat the dog, and Bevis beat the Bailiff. The noise made quite an echo against the thick hedges and a high bank that was near. When the Bailiff thought he had thrashed Pan sufficiently, he turned round and looked down at Bevis, whose face was red, and his knuckles sore with striking the Bailiff's hard coat.

"How fess you be, measter," said the Bailiff (meaning fierce), "you mind as you don't hurt yourself. Look'ee here, there've bin a fine falarie about you, zur." He meant that there had been much

excitement when it was found that Bevis was not in the garden, and was nowhere to be found. Everybody was set to hunt for him.

First they thought of the brook, lest he should have walked in among the flags that were coming up so green and strong. Then they thought of the tallet over the stable,—perhaps he had climbed up there again from the manger, over the heads of the great cart-horses, quietly eating their hay, while he put his foot on the manger and then on the projecting steps in the corner, and into the hayrack—and so up. He had done it once before, and could not get down, and so the tallet was searched. One man was sent to the Longpond, with orders to look everywhere, and borrow the punt and push in among the bulrushes.

Another was despatched to the Close, to gruffly enquire where the cottage boys were, and what they had been doing, for Bevis was known to hanker after their company, to go catching loach under the stones in the stream that crossed the road, and creeping under the arch of the bridge, and taking the moorhens' eggs from the banks of the ponds where the rushes were thick. Another was put on the pony,

to gallop up the road after the carter and his waggon, for he had set off that morning with a load of hay for the hills that could be seen to the southward.

Running over every possible thing that Bevis could have done in his mind, his papa remembered that he had lately taken to asking about the road, and would not be satisfied till they had taken him up to the sign-post—a mile beyond the village, and explained the meaning of it. Some one had told him that it was the road to Southampton—the place where the ships came. Now, Bevis was full of the ships, drawing them on the blue wall of the summer-house, and floating a boat on the trough in the cow-yard, and looking wistfully up the broad dusty highway, as if he could see the masts and yards sixty miles away or more. Perhaps when the carter went with the waggon that way, Bevis had slipped up the footpath that made a short cut across the fields, and joined the waggon at the cross roads, that he might ride to the hills thinking to see the sea on the other side.

And the Bailiff, not to be behindhand, having just come in for his lunch, ran out again without

so much as wetting his stubbly white beard in the froth of the drawn quart of ale, and made away as fast as his stiff legs could carry him to where there was a steam ploughing engine at work—a mile distant. The sight of the white steam, and the humming of the fly-wheel, always set Bevis "on the jig," as the village folk called it, to get to the machinery, and the smell of the cotton waste and oil wafted on the wind was to him like the scent of battle to the war-horse.

But Bevis was not in the tallet, nor the brook, nor among the bulrushes of the Longpond, nor under the bridge dabbling for loach, nor watching the steam plough, and the cottage boys swore their hardest (and they knew how to swear quite properly) that they had not seen him that morning. But they would look for him, and forthwith eagerly started to scour the fields and hedges. Meantime, Bevis, quite happy, was sleeping under the oak in the shadow, with Pan every now and then coming out of the rabbit-hole to snort out the sand that got into his nostrils.

But, by-and-by, when everything had been done and everybody was scattered over the earth seeking

for him, the Bailiff came back from the steam plough, weary with running, and hungry, thirsty, and cross. As he passed through the yard he caught a glimpse of Pan's kennel, which was a tub by the wood pile, and saw that the chain was lying stretched to its full length. Pan was gone. At first the Bailiff thought Bevis had loosed him, and that he had got a clue. But when he came near, he saw that the collar was not unbuckled; Pan had worked his head out, and so escaped.

The Bailiff turned the collar over thoughtfully with his foot, and felt his scanty white beard with his hard hand; and then he went back to the cart-house. Up in the cart-house, on the ledge of the wall beneath the thatch, there were three or four sticks, each about four feet long and as thick as your thumb, with the bark on—some were ground ash, some crab-tree, and one was hazel. This one was straight and as hard as could be. These sticks were put there for the time when the cows were moved, so that the men might find their sticks quick. Each had his stick, and the Bailiff's was the hazel one. With the staff in his hand the Bailiff set out straight across the grass, looking neither to the right nor the

left, but walking deliberately and without hesitation.

He got through a gap in one hedge, and then he turned to the corner making towards the rabbit-burrows, for he guessed that Pan had gone there. As he approached he saw Bevis sleeping, and smiled, for looking for the dog he had found the boy. But first stepping softly up to Bevis, and seeing that he was quite right and unhurt, only asleep, the Bailiff went to the hedge and thrust his staff into the hole where Pan was at work.

Out came Pan, and instantly down came the rod. Pan cowered in the grass; he was all over sand, which flew up in a cloud as the rod struck him again. "Yowp! yow—wow—wow!" and this row awoke Bevis.

Bevis battled hard for his dog, but the Bailiff had had his lunch delayed, and his peace of mind upset about the boy, and he was resolutely relieving himself upon the spaniel. Now the hazel rod being dry and stiff, was like a bar of iron, and did not yield or bend in the least, but made the spaniel's ribs rattle. Pan could not get low enough into the grass; he ceased to howl, so great was the pain,

but merely whimpered, and the tears filled his brown eyes. At last the Bailiff ceased, and immediately Bevis pulled out his handkerchief, and sat down on the grass and wiped away the spaniel's tears.

"Now, measter, you come along wi' I," said the Bailiff, taking his hand. Bevis would not come, saying he hated him. But when the Bailiff told him about the hunt there had been, and how the people were everywhere looking for him, Bevis began to laugh, thinking it was rare fun.

"Take me 'pick-a-back,'" said he.

So the Bailiff stooped and took him. "Gee-up!" said Bevis, punching his broad back and kicking him to go faster. Pan, now quite forgotten, crept along behind them.

Bevis listened to the lecture they gave him at home with a very bad grace. He sulked and pouted, as if he had himself been the injured party. But no sooner was he released from the dinner-table, than he was down on his knees at his own particular corner cupboard, the one that had been set apart for his toys and things ever since he could walk. It was but a small cupboard, made across the angle of two walls, and with one shelf only, yet it

was bottomless, and always contained something new.

There were the last fragments of the great box of wooden bricks, cut and chipped, and notched and splintered by that treasure, his pocket-knife. There was the tin box for the paste, or the worms in moss, when he went fishing. There was the wheel of his old wheelbarrow, long since smashed and numbered with the Noah's arks that have gone the usual way. There was the brazen cylinder of a miniature steam-engine bent out of all shape. There was the hammer-head made specially for him by the blacksmith down in the village, without a handle, for people were tired of putting new handles to it, he broke them so quickly. There was a horse-shoe, and the iron catch of a gate, and besides these a boxwood top, which he could not spin, but which he had paid away half the savings in his money-box for, because he had seen it split the other boys' tops in the road.

In one corner was a brass cannon, the touch-hole blackened by the explosion of gunpowder, and by it the lock of an ancient pistol—the lock only, and neither barrel nor handle. An old hunting crop, some feathers from pheasants' tails, part of a mole-

trap, an old brazen bugle, much battered, a wooden fig-box full of rusty nails, several scraps of deal board and stumps of cedar pencil were heaped together in confusion. But these were not all, nor could any written inventory exhaust the contents, and give a perfect list of all that cupboard held. There was always something new in it: Bevis never went there, but he found something.

With the hunting crop he followed the harriers and chased the doubling hare; with the cannon he fought battles, such as he saw in the pictures; the bugle, too, sounded the charge (the Bailiff sometimes blew it in the garden to please him, and the hollow "who-oo!" it made echoed over the fields); with the deal boards and the rusty nails, and the hammer-head, he built houses, and even cities. The jagged and splintered wooden bricks, six inches long, were not bricks, but great beams and baulks of timber; the wheel of the wheelbarrow was the centre of many curious pieces of mechanism. He could see these things easily. So he sat down at his cupboard and forgot the lecture instantly; the pout disappeared from his lips as he plunged his hand into the inexhaustible cupboard.

"Bevis, dear," he heard presently, "you may have an apple."

Instantly, and without staying to shut the door on his treasures, he darted upstairs—up two flights, with a clatter and a bang, burst open the door, and was in the apple-room. It was a large garret or attic, running half the length of the house, and there, in the autumn, the best apples from the orchard were carried, and put on a thin layer of hay, each apple apart from its fellow (for they ought not to touch), and each particular sort, the Blenheim Oranges and the King Pippins, the Creepers and the Grindstone Pippins (which grew nowhere else), divided from the next sort by a little fence of hay.

The most of them were gone now, only a few of the keeping apples remained, and from these Bevis, with great deliberation, chose the biggest, measuring them by the eye and weighing them in his hand. Then down-stairs again with a clatter and a bang, down the second stairs this time, past the gun-room, where the tools were kept, and a carpenter's bench; then through the whole length of the ground floor from the kitchen to the parlour, slamming

every door behind him, and kicking over the chairs in front of him.

There he stayed half a minute to look at the hornet's nest under the glass case on the mantelpiece. The comb was built round a central pillar or column, three stories one above the other, and it had been taken from the willow tree by the brook, the huge hollow willow which he had twice tried to chop down, that he might make a boat of it. Then out of doors, and up the yard, and past the cart-house, when something moved in the long grass under the wall. It was a Weasel, caught in a gin.

The trap had been set by the side of a drain for rats, and the Weasel coming out, or perhaps frightened by footsteps, and hastening carelessly, had been trapped. Bevis, biting his apple, looked at the Weasel, and the Weasel said, "Sir Bevis, please let me out, this gin hurts me so; the teeth are very sharp and the spring is very strong, and the tar-cord is very stout, so that I cannot break it. See how the iron has skinned my leg and taken off the fur, and I am in such pain. Do please let me go, before the ploughboy comes, or he will hit me with a stick, or smash me with a stone, or put his iron-

shod heel on me; and I have been a very good weasel, Bevis. I have been catching the horrid rats that eat the barley-meal put for the pigs. Oh, let me out, the gin hurts me so!"

Bevis put his foot on the spring, and was pressing it down, and the Weasel thought he was already free, and looked across at the wood pile under which he meant to hide, when Bevis heard a little squeak close to his head, and looked up and saw a Mouse under the eaves of the cart-house, peeping forth from a tiny crevice, where the mortar had fallen from between the stones of the wall.

"Bevis, Bevis!" said the Mouse, "don't you do it—don't you let that Weasel go! He is a most dreadful wicked weasel, and his teeth are ever so much sharper than that gin. He does not kill the rats, because he is afraid of them (unless he can assassinate one in his sleep), but he murdered my wife and sucked her blood, and her body, all dry and withered, is up in the beam there, if you will get a ladder and look. And he killed all my little mouses, and made me very unhappy, and I shall never be able to get another wife to live with me in this cart-house while he is about. There is no

way we can get away from him. If we go out into the field he follows us there, and if we go into the sheds he comes after us there, and he is a cruel beast, that wicked weasel. You know you ate the partridge's eggs," added the Mouse, speaking to the Weasel.

"It is all false," said the Weasel. "But it is true that you ate the wheat out of the ears in the wheat-rick, and you know what was the consequence. If that little bit of wheat you ate had been threshed, and ground, and baked, and made into bread, then that poor girl would have had a crust to eat, and would not have jumped into the river, and she would have had a son, and he would have been a great man and fought battles, just as Bevis does with his brazen cannon, and won great victories, and been the pride of all the nation. But you ate those particular grains of wheat that were meant to do all this, you wicked little mouse. Besides which, you ran across the bed one night, and frightened Bevis's mother."

"But I did not mean to," said the Mouse; "and you did mean to kill my wife, and you ate the partridge's eggs."

"And a very good thing I did," said the Weasel. "Do you know what would have happened, if I had not taken them? I did it all for good, and with the best intentions. For if I had left the eggs one more day, there was a man who meant to have stolen them all but one, which he meant to have left to deceive the keeper. If he had stolen them, he would have been caught, for the keeper was watching for him all the time, and he would have been put to prison, and his children would have been hungry. So I ate the eggs, and especially I ate every bit of the one the man meant to have left."

"And why were you so particular about eating that egg?" asked Bevis.

"Because," said the Weasel, "if that egg had come to a partridge chick, and the chick had lived till the shooting-time came, then the sportsman and his brother, when they came round, would have started it out of the stubble, and the shot from the gun of the younger would have accidentally killed the elder, and people would have thought it was done to murder him for the sake of the inheritance."

"Now, is this true?" said Bevis.

"Yes, that it is; and I killed the mouse's wife also for the best of reasons."

"You horrid wretch!" cried the Mouse.

"Oh, you needn't call me a wretch," said the Weasel; "I am sure you ought to be grateful to me, for your wife was very jealous because you paid so much attention to the Miss Mouse you want to marry now, and in the night she meant to have gnawn your throat."

"And you frightened my mother," said Bevis, "by running across her bed in the night;" and he began to press on the spring of the gin.

"Yes, that he did," said the Weasel, overjoyed; "and he made a hole in the boards of the floor, and it was down that hole that the half-sovereign rolled and was lost, and the poor maid-servant sent away because they thought she had stolen it."

"What do you say to that?" asked Bevis.

But the Mouse was quite aghast and dumbfounded, and began to think that it was he after all who was in the wrong, so that for the moment he could not speak. Just then Bevis caught sight of the colt that had come up beside his mother, the cart mare, to the fence; and thinking that he would

go and try and stroke the pretty creature, Bevis started forward, forgetting all about the Weasel and the Mouse. As he started, he pressed the spring down, and in an instant the Weasel was out, and had hobbled across to the wood pile. When the Mouse saw this, he gave a little squeak of terror, and ran back to his hiding-place.

But when Bevis put out his hand to stroke the colt, the colt started back, so he picked up a stick and threw at him. Then he took another stick and hunted the hens round and round the ricks to make them lay their eggs faster, as it is well known that is the best way. For he remembered that last year they had shown him three tiny bantam chicks, such darling little things, all cuddled cosily together in the hollow of a silver table-spoon. The hens clucked and raced, and Bevis raced after and shouted, and the cock slipping on one side, for it hurt his dignity to run away like the rest, hopped upon the railings, flapped his wings, crew, and cried, "You'll be glad when I'm dead." That was how Bevis translated his "hurra-ca-roorah."

In the midst of the noise out came Polly, the dairymaid, with a bone for Pan, which Bevis no

sooner saw, than he asked her to let him give Pan his dinner. "Very well, dear," said Polly, and went in to finish her work. So Bevis took the bone, and Pan, all weary and sore from his thrashing, crept out from his tub to receive it; but Bevis put the bone on the grass (all the grass was worn bare where Pan could reach) just where the spaniel could smell it nicely but could not get it. Pan struggled, and scratched, and howled, and scratched again, and tugged till his collar, buckled tightly now, choked him, and he gasped and panted, while Bevis taking the remnant of his apple from his pocket, nibbled it and laughed with a face like an angel's for sweetness.

Then a rook went over and cawed, and Bevis, looking up at the bird, caught a glimpse of the swing over the wall—it stood under the sycamore tree. Dropping the bit of apple, away he ran to the swing, and sat in it, and pushed himself off. As he swung forward he straightened his legs and leant back; when he swung back he drew his feet under him and leant forward, and by continuing this the weight of his body caused the swing to rise like a pendulum till he went up among the sycamore boughs, nearly as high as the ivy-grown roof of the summer-house,

just opposite. There he went to and fro, as easily as possible, shutting his eyes and humming to himself.

Presently a cock chaffinch came and perched in the ash close by, and immediately began to sing his war-song: "I am lord of this tree," sang the chaffinch, "I am lord of this tree; every bough is mine, and every leaf, and the wind that comes through it, and the sunshine that falls on it, and the rain that moistens it, and the blue sky over it, and the grass underneath it—all this is mine. My nest is going to be made in the ivy that grows half-way up the trunk, and my wife is very busy to-day bringing home the fibres and the moss, and I have just come back a little while to tell you all that none of you must come into or touch my tree. I like this tree, and therefore it is mine. Be careful that none of you come inside the shadow of it, or I shall peck you with all my might."

Then he paused awhile, and Bevis went on swinging and listening. In a minute or two another chaffinch came to the elm in the hedge just outside the garden, and quite close to the ash. Directly he perched, he ruffled up and began to sing too, "I am lord of this tree, and it is a very high

tree, much higher than the ash, and even above the oak where that slow fellow the crow is building. Mine is the very highest tree of all, and I am the brightest and prettiest of all the chaffinches. See my colours how bright they are, so that you would hardly know me from a bullfinch. There is not a feather rumpled in my wing, or my tail, and I have the most beautiful eyes of all of you."

Hardly had he done singing than another chaffinch came into the crab-tree, a short way up the hedge, and he began to sing too. "I have a much bigger tree than either of you, but as it is at the top of the field I cannot bring it down here, but I have come down into this crab-tree, and I say it is mine, and I am lord of two trees. I am stronger than both of you, and neither of you dare come near me."

The two other chaffinches were silent for a minute, and then one of them, the knight of the ash-tree, flew down into the hedge under the crab-tree; and instantly down flew the third chaffinch, and they fought a battle, and pecked and buffeted one another with their wings, till Bevis' tears ran down with laughing. Presently they parted, and the third chaffinch went home to his tree at the top

of the field, leaving one little feather on the ground, which the first chaffinch picked up and carried to his nest in the ash.

But scarcely had he woven it into the nest than down flew the second chaffinch from the elm into the shadow of the ash. Flutter, flutter went the first chaffinch to meet him, and they had such a battle as Bevis had never seen before, and fought till they were tired; then each flew up into his tree, and sang again about their valour.

Immediately afterwards ten sparrows came from the house-top into the bushes, chattering and struggling all together, scratching, pecking, buffeting, and all talking at once. After they had had a good fight they all went back to the house-top, and began to tell each other what tremendous blows they had given. Then there was such a great cawing from the rook trees, which were a long way off, that it was evident a battle was going on there, and Bevis heard the chaffinch say that one of the rooks had been caught stealing his cousin's sticks.

Next two goldfinches began to fight, and then a blackbird came up from the brook and perched on a rail, and he was such a boaster, for he said he had

the yellowest bill of all the blackbirds, and the blackest coat, and the largest eye, and the sweetest whistle, and he was lord over all the blackbirds. In two minutes up came another one from out of the bramble bushes at the corner, and away they went chattering at each other. Presently the starlings on the chimney began to quarrel, and had a terrible set-to. Then a wren came by, and though he was so small, his boast was worse than the blackbirds', for he said he was the sharpest, and the cleverest of all the birds, and knew more than all put together.

Afar off, in the trees, there were six or seven thrushes, all declaring that they were the best singers, and had the most speckled necks; and up in the sky the swallows were saying that they had the whitest bosoms.

"Oo! whoo," cried a wood-pigeon from the very oak under which Bevis had gone to sleep. "There are none who can fly so fast as I can. I am a captain of the wood-pigeons, and in the winter I have three hundred and twenty-two pigeons under me, and they all do exactly as I tell them. They fly when I fly, and settle down when I settle down. If I go to the west, they go to the west; and if I go to the east,

then they follow to the east. I have the biggest acorns, and the best of the peas, for they leave them especially for me. And not one of all the three hundred and twenty-two pigeons dares to begin to eat the wheat in August till I say it is ripe and they may, and not one of them dares to take a wife till I say yes. Oo-whoo! Is not my voice sweet and soft, and delicious, far sweeter than that screeching nightingale's in the hawthorn yonder?"

But he had no sooner finished than another one began in the fir copse, and said he was captain of one thousand pigeons, and was ever so much stronger, and could fly ten miles an hour faster. So away went the first pigeon to the fir copse, and there was a great clattering of wings and "oo-whoo"-ing, and how it was settled Bevis could not tell.

So as he went on swinging, he heard all the birds quarrelling, and boasting, and fighting, hundreds of them all round, and he said to the chaffinch on the ash :—

"Chaffinch, it seems to me that you are all very wicked birds, for you think of nothing but fighting all day long."

The chaffinch laughed, and said, "My dear Sir

Bevis, I do not know what you mean by wicked. But fighting is very nice indeed, and we all feel so jolly when fighting time comes. For you must know that the spring is the duelling time, when all the birds go to battle. There is not a tree nor a bush on your papa's farm, nor on all the farms all round, nor in all the country, nor in all this island, but some fighting is going on. I have not time to tell you all about it; but I wish you could read our history, and all about the wars that have been going on these thousand years. Perhaps if you should ever meet the Squirrel he will tell you, for he knows most about history. As we all like it so much, it must be right, and we never hurt one another very much. Sometimes a feather is knocked out, and sometimes one gets a hard peck; but it does not do any harm. And after it is over, in the autumn we are all very good friends, and go hunting together. You may see us, hundreds of us in your papa's stubble-fields, Bevis, all flying together very happy. I think the sky-larks fight the most, for they begin almost in the winter if the sun shines warm for an hour, and they keep on all day in the summer, and till it is quite dark and the stars are out, besides getting up before

the cuckoo to go on again. Yet they are the sweetest, and nicest, of all the birds, and the most gentle, and do not mind our coming into their fields. So I am sure, Bevis, that you are wrong, and fighting is not wicked if you love one another. You and Mark are fond of one another, but you hit him sometimes, don't you?"

"Yes, that I do," said Bevis, very eagerly, "I hit him yesterday so hard with my bat that he would not come and play with me. It is very nice to hit any one."

"But you cannot do it like we do it," said the chaffinch, swelling with pride again, "for we sing and you can't, and if you can't sing you have no business to fight, and besides, though you are much older than me you are not married yet. Now I have such a beautiful wife, and to tell you the truth, Bevis, we do the fighting because the ladies love to see it, and kiss us for it afterwards. I am the knight of this tree!"

After which Bevis, being tired of swinging, went to the summer-house to read what he had written with his stump of pencil till he was called to tea. In the evening, when the sun was sinking, he went

out and lay down on the seat—it was a broad plank grey with lichen—under the russet apple-tree, looking towards the west, over the brook below. He saw the bees coming home to the hives close by on the haha, and they seemed to come high in the air, flying straight as if from the distant hills where the sun was. He heard the bees say that there were such quantities of flowers on the hills, and such pleasant places, and that the sky was much more blue up there, and he thought if he could he would go to the hills soon.

CHAPTER III.

ADVENTURES OF THE WEASEL.

After awhile the mowers came and began to cut the long grass in the Home Field, and the meadow by the brook. Bevis could see them from the garden, and it was impossible to prevent him from straying up the footpath, so eager was he to go nearer. The best thing that could be done, since he could not be altogether stopped, was to make him promise that he would not go beyond a certain limit. He might wander as much as he pleased inside the hedge and the Home Field, in which there was no pond, nor any place where he could very well come to harm. But he must not creep through the hedge, so that he would always be in sight from the garden. If he wished to enter the meadow by the brook he must ask special permission, that some one might be put to watch now and then.

But more expressly he was forbidden to enter the Little Field. The grass there was not yet to be mown

—it was too long to walk in—and they were afraid lest he should get through the hedge, or climb over the high pad-locked gate in some way or other, for the Longpond was on the other side, though it could not be seen for trees. Nor was he to approach nearer to the mowers than one swathe; he was always to keep one swathe between him and the scythes, which are extremely sharp and dangerous instruments.

Sir Bevis repeated these promises so seriously, and with so demure and innocent an expression, that no one could doubt but that he would keep them strictly, nor, indeed, did any idea of exceeding these limits occur to him. He was so overjoyed at the vast extent of territory, almost a new world thrown open for exploration, that he did not think it possible he could ever want to go any further. He rushed into the Home Field, jumping over the swathes till he was tired, and kicking the grass about with his feet. Then he wanted a prong, and a stout stick with a fork was cut and pointed for him, and with this he went eagerly to work for five minutes. Next he wanted some one to bury under the grass, and could not be satisfied till the dairy-maid was sent

out and submitted to be completely hidden under a heap of it.

Next he walked all round the field, and back home down the middle. By-and-by he sat down and looked at the mowers, who were just finishing the last corner before they went into the meadow by the brook. While he was sitting there a number of greenfinches, and sparrows, and two or three hasty starlings (for they are always in a hurry), came to the sward where the mowers had just passed, and searched about for food. They seemed so happy and looked so pretty, Bevis thought he should like to shoot one, so away he ran home to the summer-house for his bow and arrow. Hastening back with these, he built a heap of the grass to hide behind, like a breastwork, and then sat down and watched for the birds.

They did not come directly, as they ought to have done, so he kicked up his heels, and rolled over on his back, and looked up at the sky, as was his wont. Every now and then he could hear Pan whining woefully in his tub a long way off. Since the whipping the spaniel had been in disgrace, and no one would let him loose. Bevis, so delighted

with his field to roam about in, quite forgot him, and left him to sorrow in his tub. Presently he heard a lark singing so sweetly, though at a great distance, that he kept quite still to listen. The song came in verses, now it rose a little louder, and now it fell till he could hardly hear it, and again returned. Bevis got up on his knees to try and find where the lark was, but the sky was so blue there, or the bird so high up, he could not see it, though he searched and searched. It was somewhere in the next field, far beyond the great oak where he once fell asleep.

He then peered round his heap of grass, but there were no greenfinches near; they had come out from the hedges, and the starling had come from the hollow pollard where he had a nest, but all had settled a long way off from his hiding-place. Bevis was very angry, so he stood up, and pulled his bow with all his might, and let the arrow fly into the air almost straight up. When it had risen so far, it turned over and came down among the flock of birds and stuck in the ground.

They flew away in terror, and though he had not killed any, Bevis was highly delighted at the

fright they were in. He picked up his arrow, and tried another long shot at a rook on the other side of the field, but he could not send it so great a distance. As he ran for it, he saw that the rook's back was towards him, and, thinking that the rook could not see him, he raced on quietly to try and catch him, but just as he got close, up rose the rook over the hedge with a "caw, caw!" Whizz! went Bevis's arrow after him, and fell on the other side of the hedge, where he was not to go.

In his anger at the rook's behaviour Bevis forgot all about his promise; he jumped into the ditch regardless of the stinging-nettles, pushed his way up through the briars, tearing his sleeve, forced his way across the mound, and went on his hands and knees through the young green fern on the other side (just as Pan would have done) under the thick thorn bushes, and so out into the next field. It was the very field where he and Pan had wandered before, only another part of it. There was his arrow ever so far off, sticking upright in the grass among the cowslips. As he went to pick up his arrow he saw another flower growing a little further on, and went to gather that first; it was an orchid, and

when he stood up with it in his hand he heard a mouse rustle in the grass, and stepped quietly to try and see it, but the mouse hid in a hole.

Then there was an enormous humble-bee, so huge that when it stayed to suck a cowslip, the cowslip was bent down with its weight. Bevis walked after the giant humble-bee, and watched it take the honey from several cowslips; then he saw a stone standing in the field, it was not upright, but leaned to one side—yet it was almost as tall as he was. He went to the stone and looked all round it, and got up on it and sat still a minute, and while he was there a cuckoo came by, so close, that he jumped off to run after it. But the cuckoo flew fast, and began to call "cuckoo!" and it was no use to chase him.

When Bevis stopped and looked about he was in a hollow, like a big salad bowl, only all grass, and he could see nothing but the grass and cowslips all round him—no hedges—and the sky overhead. He began to dance and sing with delight at such a curious place, and when he paused the lark was on again, and not very far this time. There he was, rising gradually, singing as he went. Bevis ran

up the side of the hollow towards the lark, and saw a hedge cut and cropped low, and over it a wheat-field. He watched the lark sing, sing, sing, up into the sky, and then he thought he would go and find his nest, as he remembered the ploughboy had told him larks made their nests on the ground among the corn.

He ran to the low hedge, but though it was low it was very thorny, and while he was trying to find a place to get through, he looked over and spied a hare crouched in the rough grass, just under the hedge between it and the wheat. The hare was lying on the ground; she did not move, though she saw Bevis, and when he looked closer he saw that her big eyes were full of tears. She was crying very bitterly, all by herself, while the sun was shining so brightly, and the wind blowing so sweetly, and the flowers smelling so pleasantly, and the lark sing, sing, singing overhead.

"Oh! dear," said Bevis, so eager and so sorry, that he pushed against the hedge, and did not notice that a thorn was pricking his arm: "What ever is the matter?" But the Hare was so miserable she would not answer him at first, till he coaxed her

nicely. Then she said, "Bevis, Bevis, little Sir Bevis, do you know what you have done?"

"No," said Bevis, "I can't think: was it me?"

"Yes, it was you; you let the Weasel loose, when he was caught in the gin."

"Did I?" said Bevis, "I have quite forgotten it."

"But you did it," said the Hare, "and now the Weasel has killed my son, the leveret, while he was sleeping, and sucked his blood, and I am so miserable; I do not care to run away any more." Then the Hare began to weep bitterly again, till Bevis did not know what to do to comfort her.

"Perhaps the Weasel only killed the leveret for your good," he said presently.

"What!" cried the Hare, putting her fore-feet down hard, and stamping with indignation, "That is what the wicked old wretch told you, did he not, about the Mouse and the partridge's eggs. Cannot you see that it is all a pack of lies? But I do not wonder that he deceives you, dear, since he has deceived the world for so long. Let me tell you, Sir Bevis, the Weasel is the wickedest and most dreadful creature that lives, and above all things he is so

cunning he can make people believe anything he chooses, and he has succeeded in making fools of us all—every one.

"There is not one of all the animals in the hedge, nor one of the birds in the trees, that he has not cheated. He is so very, very, cunning, and his talk is so soft and smooth. Do you please take care, Sir Bevis, or perhaps he may deceive you, as he deceived the Fox. Why, do you know, he has made the people believe that his crimes are committed by the Fox, who consequently bears all the disgrace; and not only that, but he has spread it abroad that the Fox is the most cunning of all, in order that he may not be suspected of being so clever as he is. I daresay the Weasel will have me some day, and I do not care if he does, now my leveret is dead; and very soon his poor bones will be picked clean by the ants, and after the corn is carried the plough will bury them."

Bevis was terribly distressed at the Hare's story, and showed such indignation against the Weasel, and stamped his little foot so hard, knitting his brow, that the Hare was somewhat appeased, and began to explain all about it.

"Of course you did not know, dear," she said, "when you stepped on the spring of the gin, what trouble we had had to get him into the trap. For we had all suffered so long from his cruelty, that we had all agreed at last to try and put an end to it. The trees could not bear to stand still and see it go on under them, yet they could not move. The earth could not bear to feel him running about on his bloodthirsty business, through the holes the rabbits had made. The grass hated to feel him pushing through, for it had so often been stained with the blood that he had shed. So we all took counsel together, and I carried the messages, dear, from the oak, where you slept, to the ash and the elm, and to the earth in the corner where the rabbits live; and the birds came up into the oak and gave their adherence, every one; and the Fox, too, though he did not come himself, for he is too cunning to commit himself till he knows which way the wind is going to blow, sent word of his high approval.

"Thus we were all prepared to act against that midnight assassin, the Weasel, but we could not begin. The trees could not move, the earth could not wag a step, the grass could do nothing, and so it went

on for some months, during all which time the Weasel was busy with his wickedness, till at last the Bailiff set the gin for the Rat by the cart-house. Then the Fox came out by day—contrary to his custom, for he likes a nap—and went to a spot where he knew a rabbit sat in the grass; and he hunted the poor rabbit (it was very good sport to see—I do not like rabbits), till he had driven him across the ditch, where the Weasel was. Then the Fox stopped, and hid himself in the furze; and the Weasel, first looking round to see that no one was near, stole after the rabbit. Now the rabbit knew that the Fox was about, and therefore he was afraid to run across the open field; all he could do was to go down the hedge towards the garden.

"Everything was going on well, and we sent word to the Rat, to warn him against the gin—we did not like the Rat, but we did not want the gin thrown—don't you see, dear? But when the rabbit had gone half-way down the hedge, and was close to the garden, he became afraid to venture any nearer your house, Bevis. Still the Weasel crept after him, and presently drove him almost up to your sycamore-tree. Then the rabbit did not know what to do; for if he went

forward the people in the house might see him and bring out the gun, and if he turned back the Weasel would have him, and if he ran out into the field the Fox would be there, and he could not climb up a tree. He stopped still, trying to think, till the Weasel came so near he could smell the rabbit's blood, and then, in his terror, the rabbit darted out from the hedge, and into the ditch of your haha wall, under where the bee-hives are. There he saw a dry drain, and hopped into it, forgetting in his fright that he might not be able to get out at the other end.

"The Weasel thought he had now got him safe, and was just going to rush across and follow, when an ant spoke to him from the trunk of a tree it was climbing. The ant said the Fox had asked him yesterday to watch, and if the Weasel came that way, to warn him that there was a plot laid for his life, and not to be too venturesome. This was a piece of the same double-faced ways the Fox has been notorious for these many years past. No one hates the Weasel so much as the Fox, but he said to himself, 'The Weasel is so cunning, that even if he is caught, he is sure to find some way to get free,

and then he will perhaps discover that I had a hand in it, and will turn round on me and spoil some of my schemes out of spite. Besides which, I don't see why I should take much interest in the Hare or the Mouse.' So, though he hunted the rabbit for us, yet he sent the Weasel this message, to take care and mind and not be too bold.

"When the Weasel heard this he stopped, and thought to himself that it was rather dangerous to go so near a house, almost under it; and yet he could not help licking his mouth, as he remembered the sweet scent of the rabbit's blood. But he was so very, very cunning, that he thought to himself the rabbit would be obliged to come out again presently, and would be sure to come up the hedge if he did not see the Weasel. So the Weasel turned round to go up the hedge, and we were all in anxiety lest the scheme should miscarry. But as the Weasel was going under the elm, the elm dropped a large dead branch, and as it came crashing down, it fell so near the Weasel as to pinch his foot, and, hearing another branch go crack, he lost his presence of mind, turned back again, and darted across the corner into the drain. There the scent of the rabbit

was so strong he could not help but follow it, and in a moment or two he saw the poor creature crouched at the end where he could not pass.

"The Weasel bounded forward, when the earth squeezed out a stone, and the stone fell between the Weasel and the rabbit. Before he could tell what to do, the earth squeezed out another stone behind him, and he was caught, and could neither go forward or backward. Now we thought we had got him, and that he must starve to death. As for the rabbit, when the stone fell down it left a hole above, up which he scrambled into the cow-yard, and there hid himself behind a bunch of nettles till night, when he escaped into the field.

"Meantime the Weasel in a dreadful fright was walking to and fro in his narrow prison, gnashing his teeth with rage and terror, and calling to all the animals and birds and insects and even to the mole (whom he despised most of all) to help him out. He promised to be the nicest, kindest Weasel that ever was known; but it was no use, for they were all in the secret, and overjoyed to see him on the point of perishing. There he had to stay, and though he scratched and scratched, he could not make any hole

through the solid stone, and by-and-bye he got weaker, and he began to die. While he was dying the Rat came and peeped down at him through a chink, and laughed and said, 'What is the use of all your cunning, you coward? If you had been bold like me you would never have got into this scrape, by being afraid of a dead branch of a tree because it pinched your foot. I should have run by quickly. You are a silly, foolish, blind sort of creature; could you not see that all the things had agreed to deceive you?'

"At this the Weasel was so wroth it woke him up from his dying, and he returned the taunt and said, 'Rat, you are by far the silliest to help the Hare and the Mouse; it is true they sent you a message about the gin, but that was not for love of you, I am sure, and I can't think why they should send it; but you may depend it is some trick, and very likely the gin is not where they said at all, but in another place, and you will walk into it when you are not thinking, and then you will curse the Hare and the Mouse.'

"'Ah,' said the Rat, 'that sounds like reason; you are right, the Hare and the Mouse are going to

play me a trick. But I will spite them, I will let you out.'

"'Will you?' said the Weasel, starting up and feeling almost strong again. 'But you can't, these stones are so thick you cannot move them, nor scratch through them, nor raise them; no, you cannot let me out.'

"'Oh, yes, I can,' said the Rat, 'I know a way to move the biggest stones, and if you can only wait a day or two I will make this chink large enough for you to come up.'

"'A day or two,' said the Weasel in despair; 'why, I am nearly dead now with hunger.'

"'Well, then,' said the Rat, 'gnaw your own tail;' and off he went laughing at the joke. The miserable Weasel cried and sniffed, and sniffed and cried, till by-and-bye he heard the Rat come back and begin to scratch outside. Presently the Rat stopped, and was going away again, when the Weasel begged and prayed him not to leave him to die there in the dark.

"'Very well,' said the Rat, 'I will send the cricket to sing to you. In a day or two you will see the chink get bigger, and meantime you can eat

your tail; and as you will get very thin, you will be able to creep through a very small hole and get out all the quicker. Ha! ha! As for me, I am going to have a capital dinner from Pan's dish, for he has fallen asleep in his tub.'

"So the Weasel was left to himself, and though he watched and watched, he could not see the chink open in the least, and he got so dreadfully hungry that at last, after sucking his paws, he was obliged to bring his tail round and begin to gnaw it a little bit. The pain was dreadful, but he could not help himself, he was obliged to do it or die. In the evening the cricket came, as the Rat had promised, to the top of the chink, and at once began to sing. He sang all about the lady cricket with whom he was in love, and then about the beautiful stars that were shining in the sky, and how nice it was to be a cricket, for the crickets were by far the most handsome and clever of all creatures, and everybody would like to be a cricket if they could.

"Next, he went on to praise himself, that his lady might hear what fine limbs he had, and so noble a form, and such a splendid chink to live in. Thus he kept on the livelong night, and all about himself;

and his chirp, chirp, chirp filled the Weasel's prison with such a noise that the wretched thing could not sleep. He kept asking the cricket to tell him if the Rat had really done anything to enlarge the chink; but the cricket was too busy to answer him till the dawn, and then, having finished his song, he found time to attend to the Weasel.

"'You have been very rude,' he said, 'to keep on talking while I was singing, but I suppose, as you are only an ignorant Weasel, you do not understand good manners, and therefore I will condescend so far as to inform you of the measures taken by my noble friend the Rat to get you out. If you were not so extremely ignorant and stupid you would guess what he has done.'

"Now all this was very bitter to the Weasel, who had always thought he knew everything, to be insulted by a cricket; still he begged to be told what it was. 'The Rat,' went on the cricket, 'has brought a little piece from a fungus, and has scratched a hole beside the stone and put it in there. Now, when this begins to grow and the fungus pushes up, it will move the stone and open a chink. In this way I have seen my lord the Rat heave up

the heaviest paving stones and make a road for himself. Now are you not stupid?' Then the cricket went home to bed.

"All day long the miserable Weasel lay on the floor of his prison, driven every now and then to gnaw his tail till he squeaked with the pain. The only thing that kept him from despair was the hope of the revenge he would have, if ever he did get out, on those who had laid the trap for him. For hours he lay insensible, and only woke up when the Rat looked down the chink and asked him, with a jolly chuckle, how his tail tasted, and then went off without waiting for an answer. Then the cricket came again, and taking not the least notice of the prisoner, sang all night.

"In the morning the Weasel looked up, and saw that the chink had really opened. He crawled to it, he was so faint he could not walk, so he had to crawl over the floor, which was all red with his own blood. The fungus, a thick, yellowish-green thing, like a very large and unwholesome mushroom, was growing fast, so fast he could see it move, and very slowly it shoved and lifted up the stone. The chink was now so far open that in his thin, emaciated

state, the Weasel could have got through; but he was so weak he could not climb up. He called to the Rat, and the Rat came and tried to reach him, but it was just a little too far down.

"'If I only had something to drink,' said the Weasel, 'only one drop of water, I think I could do it, but I am faint from thirst.'

"Off ran the Rat to see what he could do, and as he passed the tub where Pan lived he saw a bowl of water just pumped for the spaniel. The bowl was of wood, with a projecting handle—not a ring to put the fingers through, but merely a short straight handle. He went round to the other side of the tub in which Pan was dozing and began to scratch. Directly Pan heard the scratching:—

"'Ho! ho!' said he, 'that's that abominable Rat that steals my food,' and he darted out, and in his tremendous hurry his chain caught the handle of the bowl, just as the Rat had hoped it would. Over went the bowl, and all the water was spilt, but the Rat, the instant he heard Pan coming, had slipped away back to the Weasel.

"When Pan was tired of looking where he had heard the scratching, he went back to take a lap,

but found the bowl upset, and that all the water had run down the drain. As he was very thirsty after gnawing a salt bacon-bone, he set up a barking, and the dairy-maid ran out, thinking it was a beggar, and began to abuse him for being so clumsy as to knock over his bowl. Pan barked all the louder, so she hit him with the handle of her broom, and he went howling into his tub. He vowed vengeance against the Rat, but that did not satisfy his thirst.

"Meantime the water had run along the drain, and though the fungus greedily sucked up most of it, the Weasel had a good drink. After that he felt better, and he climbed up the chink, squeezing through and dragging his raw tail behind him, till he nearly reached the top. But there it was still a little tight, and he could not manage to push through, not having strength enough left. He felt himself slipping back again, and called on the Rat to save him. The Rat without ceremony leant down the chink, and caught hold of his ear with his teeth, and snipped it so tight he bit it right through, but he dragged the Weasel out.

"There he lay a long time half dead and exhausted,

under a dock leaf which hid him from view. The Rat began to think that the Weasel would die after all, so he came and said, 'Wake up, coward, and come with me into the cart-house, there is a very nice warm hole there, and I will tell you something; if you stay here very likely the Bailiff may see you, and if Pan should be let loose he will sniff you out in a second.' So the Weasel, with very great difficulty, dragged himself into the cart-house, and found shelter in the hole.

"Now the Rat, though he had helped the Weasel, did not half like him, for he was afraid to go to sleep while the Weasel was about, lest his guest should fasten on his throat, for he knew he was treacherous to the last degree. He cast about in his mind how to get rid of him, and at the same time to serve his own purpose. By-and-by he said that there was a Mouse in the cart-house who had a very plump wife, and two fat little mouses. At this the Weasel pricked up his ears, for he was so terribly hungry, and sat up and asked where they were. The Rat said the wife and the children were up in the beam; the wood had rotted, and they had a hole there, but he was afraid the Mouse himself

was away from home just then, most likely in the corn-bin, where the barley-meal for the pigs was kept.

"'Never mind,' said the Weasel eagerly, 'the wife and the baby mice will do very well,' and up he started and climbed up through the Rat's hole in the wall to the roof, and then into the hole in the beam, where he had a good meal on the mice. Now the Rat hated this Mouse because he lived so near, and helped himself to so much food, and being so much smaller, he could get about inside the house where you live, Bevis, without being seen, and so got very fat, and made the Rat jealous. He thought, too, that when the Weasel had eaten the wife and the babies, that he would be strong enough to go away. Presently the Weasel came down from his meal, and looked so fierce and savage that the Rat, strong as he was, was still more anxious to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

"He told the Weasel that there was a way by which he could get to the corn-bin without the least danger, though it was close to the house, and there he would be certain to find the Mouse himself, and very likely another Miss Mouse whom he used to

meet there. At this the Weasel was so excited he could hardly wait to be shown the way, and asked the Rat to put him in the road directly; he was so hungry he did not care what he did. Without delay the Rat took him to the mouth of the hole, and told him to stay there and listen a minute to be sure that no one was coming. If he could not hear any footsteps, all he had to do was to rush across the road there, only two or three yards, to the rough grass, the dandelions, and the docks opposite. Just there there was an iron grating made in the wall of the house to let in the air and keep the rats out; but one of the bars had rusted off and was broken, and that was the Mouse's track to the corn bin.

"The Weasel put out his head, glanced round, saw no one, and without waiting to listen rushed out into the roadway. In an instant the Rat pushed against a small piece of loose stone, which he kept for the purpose, and it fell down and shut up the mouth of his hole. As the Weasel was running across the roadway suddenly one of the labourers came round the corner with a bucket of food for the pigs. Frightened beyond measure, the Weasel hastened back to the Rat's hole, but could not get in because

of the stone. Not knowing what to do, he ran round the carthouse, where there was some grass under the wall, with the man coming close behind him. Now it was just there that the Bailiff had set the gin for the Rat, near the mouth of the drain, but the Rat knew all about it, and used the other hole.

"The grass, knowing that we wished to drive the Weasel that way into the gin, had tried to grow faster and hide the trap, but could not get on very well because the weather was so dry. But that morning, when the Rat upset Pan's bowl of water, and it ran down the drain, some part of it reached the roots of the grass and moistened them, then the grass shot up quick and quite hid the trap, except one little piece. Now, seeing the Weasel rushing along in his fright, the grass was greatly excited, but did not know what to do to hide this part, so the grass whispered to his friend the Wind to come to his help.

"This the Wind was very ready to do, for this reason—he hated to smell the decaying carcases of the poor creatures the Weasel killed, and left to rot and to taint the air, so that it quite spoilt his morn-

ing ramble over the fields. With a puff the Wind came along and blew a dead leaf, one of last year's leaves, over the trap, and so hid it completely.

"The Weasel saw the mouth of the drain, and thinking to be safe in a minute darted at it, and was snapped up by the gin. The sudden shock deprived him of sense or motion, and well for him it did, for had he squeaked or moved ever so little the man with the bucket must have seen or heard him. After a time he came to himself, and again began to beg the Rat to help him; but the Rat, having had his revenge on the Mouse, did not much care to trouble about it, and, besides, he remembered how very wolfish and fierce the Weasel had looked at him when in his hole. At least he thought he would have a night's sleep in comfort first, for he had been afraid to sleep a wink with the Weasel so near. Now the Weasel was in the gin he could have a nap.

"All night long the Weasel was in the gin, and to a certainty he would have been seen—for the Bailiff would have been sure to come and look at his trap—but if you remember, Bevis, dear, that was the very day you were lost (while asleep under the oak), and everything was confusion, and the gin was for-

gotten. Well, in the morning the Weasel begged so piteously of the Rat to help him again, that the Rat began to think he would, now he had had a good sleep, when just as he was peeping out along you came, Bevis, dear, and found the Weasel in the gin.

"Now, I daresay you remember the talk you had with the Weasel, and what the Mouse said; well, the Rat was listening all the while, and he heard the Weasel say to you that he always killed the rats. 'Aha!' thought the Rat, 'catch me helping you again, sir;' and the Weasel heard him say it. So when you stepped on the spring and loosed the Weasel, he did not dare go into the drain, knowing that the Rat (while awake) was stronger than he, but hobbled as well as he could across to the wood-pile. There he stopped, exhausted, and stiff from his wounds. Meantime the Rat deliberated how best he could drive the treacherous Weasel away from the place.

"At night, accordingly, he cautiously left his hole and went across to the tub where Pan was sleeping, curled up comfortably within. The end of Pan's chain, where it was fastened to the staple outside the tub, was not of iron, but tar-cord. The last link

had been broken, and it was therefore tied in this manner. The rat easily gnawed through the tar-cord, and then slipped back to his hole to await events. About the middle of the night, when the Weasel had rested and began to stir out, Pan woke up, and seeing that it was light, stepped out to bay at the moon. He immediately found that his chain was undone, and rushed about to try and find some water, being very thirsty. He had not gone very far before he smelt the Weasel, and instantly began to chase him. The Weasel, however, slipped under a faggot, and so across and under the wood-pile, where he was safe; but he was so alarmed that presently he crept out the other side, and round by the pig-stye, and so past the stable to the rick-yard, and then into the hedge, and he never stopped running, stiff as he was, till he was half-a-mile away in the ash copse, and had crept into a rabbit's hole. He could not have got away from the wood-pile, only Pan, being so thirsty, gave up looking for him, and went down to the brook.

"In the morning, as they thought Pan had broken his chain, they kicked the spaniel howling into his tub again. And now comes the sad part of it, Bevis,

dear. You must know that when the Weasel was in the trap we all thought it was quite safe, and that our enemy was done for at last, and so we went off to a dancing-party, on the short grass of the downs by moonlight, leaving our leverets to nibble near the wheat. We stayed at the dancing-party so late that the dawn came and we were afraid to go home in the daylight, and next night we all felt so merry we had another dance, and again danced till it was morning.

"While we were sleeping in the day, the Weasel, having now recovered a good deal, crept out from the rabbit-hole in the copse. We were so far off, you see, the mice could not send us word that he had escaped from the gin in time, and indeed, none of them knew exactly where to find us; they told the swallows, and the swallows searched, but missed us. The Wind, too, blew as many ways as he could to try and reach us, but he had to blow east that day, and could not manage it. If we had only been at home we should have been on the watch; but my poor leveret, and my two friends' poor leverets, were sleeping so comfortably when the wicked Weasel stole on them one by one, and bit their necks

and killed them. He could not eat them, nor half of them, he only killed them for revenge, and oh! dear little Sir Bevis, what shall I do? what shall I do?"

"I will kill the Weasel," said Bevis. "He is dreadfully wicked. I will shoot him this minute with my bow and arrow."

But when he looked round he had got neither of them; he had dropped the bow in the Home Field when he jumped into the ditch to scramble through the hedge, and he had wandered so far among the cowslips that he could not see the arrow. Bevis looked all round again, and did not recognise any of the trees, nor the hedges, nor could he see the house nor the ricks, nor anything that he knew. His face flushed up, and the tears came into his eyes; he was lost.

"Don't cry," said the Hare, much pleased at the eagerness with which he took up the quarrel against the Weasel; "don't cry, darling, I will show you the way home and where to find your arrow. It is not very far, though you cannot see it because of the ground rising between you and it. But will you really kill the Weasel next time?"

"Yes, indeed I will," said Bevis, "I will shoot my arrow and kill him quite dead in a minute."

"But I am not sure you can hit him with your arrow; don't you remember that you could not hit the greenfinches nor the rook?"

"Well, then," said Bevis, "if you will wait till I am a man, papa will lend me his gun, and then I can certainly kill him."

"But that will be such a long time, Sir Bevis; did not your papa tell you you would have to eat another peck of salt before you could have a gun?"

"Then I know what I will do," said Bevis, "I will shoot the Weasel with my brass cannon. Ah, that is the way! And I know where papa keeps his gunpowder; it is in a tin canister on the topmost shelf, and I will tell you how I climb up there. First, I bring the big arm-chair, and then I put the stool on that, and then I stand on the lowest shelf, and I can just reach the canister."

"Take care, Sir Bevis," said the Hare, "take care, and do not open the canister where there is a fire in the room, or a candle, because a spark may blow you up just when you are not thinking."

"Oh! I know all about that; I'll take care," said Bevis, "and I will shoot the wretch of a Weasel in no time. Now please show me the way home."

"So I will; you stay there till I come to you, I will run round by the gateway."

"Why not come straight through the hedge?" said Bevis, "you could easily creep through, I'm sure."

"No, dear. I must not come that way, that road belongs to another hare, and I must not trespass."

"But you can run where you like—can you not?"

"Oh, dear no; all the hares have different roads, Sir Bevis, and if I were to run along one of theirs that did not belong to me, to-night they would bite me and thump me with their paws till I was all bruised."

"I can't see any path," said Bevis, "you can run where you like in the field, I'm sure."

"No, I can't dear; I shall have to go a quarter of a mile round to come to you, because there are three paths between you and me, and I shall have to turn and twist about not to come on them."

While Bevis was thinking about this, and how

stupid it was of the hares to have roads, the Hare ran off, and in two or three minutes came to him through the cowslips. "Oh, you pretty creature!" said Sir Bevis, stooping down and stroking her back, and playing with the tips of her long ears, "Oh, I do love you so!" At this the Hare was still more pleased, and rubbed her head against Bevis's hand.

"Now," she said, "you must come along quickly, because I dare not stay on this short grass, lest some dog should see me. Follow me, dear." She went on before him, and Bevis ran behind, and in a minute or two they went over the rising ground, past the tall stone (put there for the cows to rub their sides against), and then the Hare stopped and showed Bevis the great oak tree, where he once went to sleep. She told him to look at it well, and recollect the shape of it, so that another time he could find his way home by the tree. Then she told him to walk straight to the tree, and on his way there he would find the arrow, and close by the tree was the gap in the hedge, and when he got through the gap, he would see the house and the ricks, and if he followed the ditch then he would presently come to the place where he dropped his bow.

"Thank you," said Bevis, "I will run as fast as I can, for I am sure it must be nearly dinner time. Good-bye, you pretty creature;" and having stroked her ears just once more, off he started. In a few minutes he found his arrow, and looked back to show it to the Hare, but she was gone; so he went on to the oak, got through the gap, and there was the house at the other side of the field. He could hear Pan barking, so he felt quite at home, and walked along the ditch till he picked up his bow. He was very hungry when he got home, and yet he was glad when the dinner was over, that he might go to the cupboard and get his brass cannon.

When he came to examine the cannon, and to think about shooting the Weasel with it, he soon found that it would not do very well, because he could not hold it in his hand and point it straight, and when it went off it would most likely burn his fingers. But looking at his papa's gun he saw that the barrel, where the powder is put in, was fixed in a wooden handle called the stock, so he set to work with his pocket knife to make a handle for his cannon. He cut a long thick willow stick, choosing the willow because it was soft and easiest to cut, and

chipped away till he had made a groove in it at one end in which he put the cannon, fastening it in with a piece of thin copper wire twisted round. Next he cut a ramrod, and then he loaded his gun, and fired it off with a match to see how it went.

This he did at the bottom of the orchard, a long way from the house, for he was afraid that if they saw what he was doing they might take it from him, so he kept it hidden in the summer-house under an old sack. The cannon went off with a good bang, and the shot he had put in it stuck in the bark of an apple tree. Bevis jumped about with delight, and thought he could now kill the Weasel. It was too late to start that day, but the next morning off he marched with his gun into the Home Field, and having charged it behind the shelter of a tree out of sight, began his chase for the Weasel.

All round the field he went, looking carefully into the ditch and the hedge, and asking at all the rabbits'-holes if they knew where the scoundrel was. The rabbits knew very well, but they were afraid to answer, lest the Weasel should hear about it, and come and kill the one that had betrayed him. Twice he searched up and down without success, and was

just going to call to the Hare to come and show him, when suddenly he discovered a thrush sitting on her nest in a bush. He put down his gun, and was going to see how many eggs she had got, when the Weasel (who had no idea he was there) peeped over the bank, having a fancy for the eggs, but afraid that the nest was too high for him to reach.

"Ho! Ho!" cried Bevis, "there you are. Now I have you. Just stand still a minute, while I get my gun and strike a match."

"Whatever for?" asked the Weasel, very innocently.

"I'm going to shoot you," said Bevis, busy getting his gun ready.

"Shoot *me*!" said the Weasel, in a tone of the utmost astonishment; "why ever do you want to shoot me, Sir Bevis? Did I not tell you that I spent all my life doing good?"

"Yes, you rascal!" said Bevis, putting a pinch of powder on the touch-hole, "you know you are a wicked story-teller; you killed the poor leveret after I let you loose. Now!" and he went down on one knee, and put his cannon-stick on the other as a rest to keep it straight.

"Wait a minute," said the Weasel, "just listen to me a minute. I assure you——"

"No; I sha'n't listen to you," said Bevis, striking his match.

"Oh," said the Weasel, kneeling down, "if you will only wait one second, I will tell you all the wickedness I have committed. Don't, please, kill me before I have got this load of guilt off my mind."

"Well, make haste," said Bevis, aiming along his cannon.

"I will," said the Weasel; "and first of all, if you are going to kill me, why don't you shoot the thrush as well, for she is ever so much more wicked and cruel than I have been?"

"Oh, what a dreadful story!" said the thrush. "How can you say so?"

"Yes, you are," said the Weasel. "Sir Bevis, you remember the two snails you found in the garden path—those you put on a leaf, and watched to see which could crawl the fastest?"

"I remember," said Sir Bevis. "But you must make haste, or my match will burn out."

"And you recollect that the snails had no legs,

and could not walk, and that they had no wings and could not fly, and were very helpless creatures?"

"Yes, I remember; I left them on the path."

"Well, directly you left them, out came this great ugly speckled thrush from the shrubbery—you see how big the thrush is, quite a monster beside the poor snails; and you see what long legs she has, and great wings, and such a strong, sharp beak. This cruel monster of a thrush picked up the snails, one at a time, and smashed them on the stones, and gobbled them up."

"Well," said the thrush, much relieved, "is that all? snails are very nice to eat."

"Was it not brutally cruel?" asked the Weasel.

"Yes, it was," said Bevis.

"Then," said the Weasel, "when you shoot me, shoot the thrush too."

"So I will," said Bevis, "but how can I hit you both?"

"I will show you," said the Weasel. "I will walk along the bank till I am just in a line with the thrush's nest, and then you can take aim at both together."

So he went along the bank and stopped behind the nest, and Bevis moved his cannon-stick and took another aim.

"Dear me!" cried the thrush, dreadfully alarmed, "you surely are not going to shoot me? I never did any harm. Bevis, stop—listen to me!"

Now if the thrush had flown away she might have escaped, but she was very fond of talking, and while she was talking Bevis was busy getting his gun ready.

"It is straight now," said the Weasel; "it is pointed quite straight. Hold it still there, and I will sit so that I shall die quick:—here is my bosom. Tell the Hare to forgive me."

"Oh," said the thrush, "don't shoot!"

"Shoot!" cried the Weasel.

Bevis dropped his match on the touch-hole, puff went the priming, and bang went the cannon. Directly the smoke had cleared away, Bevis looked in the ditch, to see the dead Weasel and the thrush. There was the thrush right enough, quite dead, and fallen out of the nest; the nest, too, was knocked to pieces, and the eggs had fallen out (two were broken), but there was one not a bit smashed, lying

on the dead leaves at the bottom of the ditch. But the Weasel was nowhere to be seen.

"Weasel," cried Bevis, "where are you?" But the Weasel did not answer. Bevis looked everywhere, over the bank and round about, but could not find him. At last he saw that under some grass on the bank there was a small rabbit's hole. Now the Weasel had sat up for Bevis to shoot him right over this hole, and when he saw him move the match, just as the priming went puff, the Weasel dropped down into the hole, and the shot went over his head.

Bevis was very angry when he saw how the Weasel had deceived him, and felt so sorry for the poor thrush, whose speckled breast was all pierced by the shot, and who would never sing any more. He did not know what to do, he was so cross; but presently he ran home to fetch Pan, to see if Pan could hunt out the Weasel.

When he had gone a little way the Weasel came out of the hole, and went down into the ditch and feasted on the thrush's egg, which he could not have got had not the shot knocked the nest to pieces, just as he had contrived. He never tasted so sweet

an egg as that one, and as he sucked it up he laughed as he thought how cleverly he had deceived them all. When he heard Pan bark he went back into the hole, and so along the hedge till he reached the copse; and then creeping into another hole, a very small one, where no dog could get at him, he curled himself up very comfortably and went to sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

BROOK-FOLK.

Some time afterwards it happened one morning that Bevis was sitting on a haycock in the Home Field, eating a very large piece of cake, and thinking how extremely greedy the young rook was yonder across the meadow. For he was as big and as black as his father and mother, who were with him; and yet he kept on cawing to them to stuff his beak with sweets. Bevis, who had another large slice in his pocket, having stolen both of them from the cupboard just after breakfast, felt angry to see such greediness, and was going to get up to holloa at this ill-mannered rook, when he heard a grasshopper making some remarks close by the haycock.

"S——s," said the grasshopper to a friend, "are you going down to the brook? I am, in a minute, so soon as I have hopped round this haycock, for there will be a grand show there presently. All the birds are going to bathe, as is their custom

on Midsummer Day, and will be sure to appear in their best feathers. It is true some of them have bathed already, as they have to leave early in the morning, having business elsewhere. I spoke to the cricket just now on the subject, but he could not see that it was at all interesting. He is very narrow-minded, as you know, and cannot see anything beyond the mound where he lives. S——s."

"S——s," replied the other grasshopper; "I will certainly jump that way so soon as I have had a chat with my lady-love, who is waiting for me on the other side of the furrow. S——s."

"S——s, we shall meet by the drinking-place," said the first grasshopper; and was just hopping off when Bevis asked him what the birds went down to bathe for.

"I'm sure I do not know," said the grasshopper, speaking fast, for he was rather in a hurry to be gone, he never could stand still long together. "All I can tell you is that on Midsummer Day every one of the birds has to go down to the brook and walk in and bathe; and it has been the law for so many, many years that no one can remember when it began. They like it very much, because they can

show off their fine feathers, which are just now in full colour; and if you like to go with me you will be sure to enjoy it."

"So I will," said Bevis, and he followed the grasshopper, who hopped so far at every step that he had to walk fast to keep up with him. "But why do the birds do it?"

"Oh, I don't know why," said the grasshopper; "what is why?"

"I want to know," said Bevis, "why do they do it?"

"Why?" repeated the grasshopper, "I never heard any body say anything about that before. There is always a great deal of talking going on, for the trees have nothing else to do but to gossip with each other; but they never ask why."

After that they went on in silence a good way, except that the grasshopper cried "S—s," to his friends in the grass as he passed, and said good morning also to a mole who peeped out for a moment.

"Why don't you hop straight?" said Bevis presently. "It seems to me that you hop first one side and then the other, and go in such a

zig-zag fashion it will take us hours to reach the brook."

"How very stupid you are," said the grasshopper. "If you go straight of course you can only see just what is under your feet, but if you go first this way and then that, then you see everything. You are nearly as silly as the ants, who never see anything beautiful all their lives. Be sure you have nothing to do with the ants, Bevis, they are a mean, wretched, miserly set, quite contemptible and beneath notice. Now I go everywhere all round the field, and spend my time searching for lovely things; sometimes I find flowers, and sometimes the butterflies come down into the grass and tell me the news, and I am so fond of the sunshine, I sing to it all day long. Tell me, now, is there anything so beautiful as the sunshine and the blue sky, and the green grass, and the velvet and blue and spotted butterflies, and the trees which cast such a pleasant shadow and talk so sweetly, and the brook which is always running? I should like to listen to it for a thousand years."

"I like you," said Bevis; "jump into my hand, and I will carry you." He held his hand out flat,

and in a second up sprang the grasshopper, and alighted on his palm, and told him the way to go, and thus they went together merrily.

"Are you sure the ants are so very stupid and wicked?" asked Bevis, when the grasshopper had guided him through a gateway into the meadow by the brook.

"Indeed I am. It is true they declare that it is I who am wrong, and never lose a chance of chattering at me, because they are always laying up a store, and I wander about, laughing and singing. But then you see, Bevis, dear, they are quite demented, and so led away by their greedy, selfish wishes that they do not even know that there is a sun. They say they cannot see it, and do not believe there is any sunshine, nor do they believe there are any stars. Now I do not sing at night, but I always go where I can see a star. I slept under a mushroom last night, and he told me he was pushing up as fast as he could before some one came and picked him to put on a gridiron. I do not lay up any store, because I know I shall die when the summer ends, and what is the use of wealth then? My store and my wealth is the sunshine, dear,

and the blue sky, and the green grass, and the delicious brook who never ceases sing, sing, singing all day and night. And all the things are fond of me, the grass and the flowers, and the birds, and the animals, all of them love me. So you see I am richer than all the ants put together."

"I would rather be you than an ant," said Bevis, "I think I shall take you home and put you under a glass case on the mantel-piece."

Off jumped the grasshopper in a moment, and fell so lightly on the grass it did not hurt him in the least, though it was as far as if Bevis had tumbled down out of the clouds. Bevis tried to catch him, but he jumped so nimbly this way and that, and hopped to and fro, and lay down in the grass, so that his green coat could not be seen. Bevis got quite hot trying to catch him, and seeing this, the grasshopper, much delighted, cried out, "Are you not the stupid boy everybody is laughing at for letting the Weasel go? You will never catch the Weasel."

"I'll stamp on you," said Bevis, in a great rage.

"S——s," called the grasshopper — who was frightened at this—to his friends, and in a minute

there were twenty of them jumping all round in every direction, and as they were all just alike Bevis did not know which to run after. When he looked up there was the brook close by, and the drinking-place where the birds were to meet and bathe. It was a spot where the ground shelved gently down from the grass to the brook; the stream was very shallow and flowed over the sandy bottom with a gentle murmur.

He went down to the brook and stood on the bank, where it was high near a bush at the side of the drinking-place. "Ah, dear little Sir Bevis!" whispered a Reed, bending towards him as the Wind blew, "please do not come any nearer, the bank is steep and treacherous, and hollow underneath where the water-rats run. So do not lean over after the forget-me-nots—they are too far for you. Sit down where you are, behind that little bush, and I will tell you all about the bathing." Bevis sat down and picked a June rose from a briar that trailed over the bush, and asked why the birds bathed.

"I do not know why," said the Reed. "There is no why at all. We have been listening to the Brook, me and my family, for ever so many thousands of

years, and though the Brook has been talking and singing all that time, I never heard him ask why about anything. And the great oak, where you went to sleep, has been there, goodness me, nobody can tell how long, and every one of his leaves (he has had millions of them) have all been talking, but not one of them ever asked why; nor does the sun, nor the stars which I see every night shining in the clear water down there, so that I am quite sure there is no why at all.

"But the birds come down to bathe every Midsummer Day, the goldfinches, and the sparrows, and the blackbirds, and the thrushes, and the swallows, and the wrens, and the robins, and almost every one of them, except two or three, whose great grandfathers got into disgrace a long while ago. The rooks do not come because they are thieves, and steal the mussels, nor the crows, who are a very bad lot; the swan does not come either, unless the Brook is muddy after a storm. The swan is so tired of seeing himself in the water that he quite hates it, and that is the reason he holds his neck so high, that he may not see more of himself than he can help.

"It is no use your asking the Brook why they come, because even if he ever knew, he has forgotten. For the Brook, though he sparkles so bright in the sun, and is so clear and sweet, and looks so young, is really so very, very, old that he has quite lost his memory, and cannot remember what was done yesterday. He did not even know which way the moorhen went just now, when I inquired, having a message to send to my relations by the osier-bed yonder.

"But I have heard the heron say—he is talkative sometimes at night when you are asleep, dear, he was down here this morning paddling about—that the birds in the beginning learnt to sing by listening to the Brook, and perhaps that is the reason they pay him such deep respect. Besides, everybody knows that according to an ancient prophecy which was delivered by the Raven before he left this country, if only the birds can all bathe in the Brook on Midsummer Day and hold their tongues, and not abuse one another or quarrel, they will be able to compose their differences, and ever afterwards live happily together.

"Then they could drive away the hawk, for

there is only one hawk to ten thousand finches, and if they only marched shoulder to shoulder all together they could kill him with ease. They could smother the cat even, by all coming down at once upon her, or they could carry up a stone and drop on her head; and as for the crow, that old coward, if he saw them coming he would take wing at once. But as they cannot agree, the hawk, and the cat, and the crow do as they like. For the chaffinches all fight one another, you heard them challenging, and saw them go to battle, and then when at last they leave off and are good fellows again, they all flock together and will have nothing to do with the goldfinches, or the blackbirds. It is true the wood-pigeons, and the rooks, and the starlings, and the fieldfares and redwings are often about in the same field, but that is only because they eat the same things; if a hawk comes they all fly away from each other, and do not unite and fight him as they might do.

"But if once they could come down to the Brook on Midsummer Day, and never quarrel, then, according to the prophecy I told you of, all this diversity would cease, and they would be able to

do just as they pleased, and build three or four nests in the summer instead of one, and drive away and kill all the hawks, and crows, and cats. They tried to do it, I can't tell you how many years, but they could never succeed, for there was always a dispute about something, so at last they gave it up, and it was almost forgotten (for they came to the conclusion that it was no use to try), till last year, when the mole, the one that spoke to the grasshopper just now, reminded them of it.

"Now the reason the mole reminded them of it was because one day a hawk came down too quick for his wife (who was peeping out of doors), and snapped her up in a minute, so he bore the hawk a grudge, and set about to seek for vengeance. And as he could not fly or get at the hawk he thought he would manage it through the other birds. So one morning when the green woodpecker came down to pick up the ants with his tongue, the mole looked out and promised to show him where there was a capital feast, and to turn up the ground for him, if in return he would fly all round the forest and the fields, and cry shame on the birds for letting the hawk go on as he did when they could so

easily prevent it, just by holding their tongues one day.

"This the woodpecker promised to do, and after he had feasted off he went, and having tapped on a tree to call attention, he began to cry shame upon them, and having a very loud voice he soon let them know his mind. At which the birds resolved to try again, and, do you know, last year they very nearly succeeded. For it rained hard all Midsummer Day, and when the birds came down to the Brook they were so bedraggled, and benumbed, and cold, and unhappy, that they had nothing to say for themselves, but splashed about in silence, and everything would have happened just right had not a rook, chancing to pass over, accidentally dropped something he was carrying in his bill, which fell into the flags there.

"The starling forgot himself, and remarked he supposed it was an acorn; when the wood-pigeon called him a donkey, as the acorns were not yet ripe, nor large enough to eat; and the usual uproar began again. But afterwards, when they talked it over, they said to each other that, as they had so nearly done it, it must be quite possible, and next year

they would all hold their tongues as tight as wax, though the sun should drop out of the sky. Now the Hawk, of course, being so high up, circling round, saw and heard all this, and he was very much alarmed, as they had so nearly succeeded; and he greatly feared lest next year, what he had dreaded so long would come to pass, as the Raven had foretold.

"So he flew down and took counsel of his ancient friend the Weasel. What they said I cannot tell you, nor has it been found out, but I have no doubt they made up something wicked between them, and it is greatly to be regretted that you let the Weasel go, for the Hawk, sharp as he is, is not very clever at anything new, and if he had not got the Weasel to advise him I suspect he would not be much after all. We shall see presently what they have contrived—I am much mistaken if they have not put their heads together for something. Do you keep quite still, Bevis dear, when the birds come, and take care and not frighten them."

"I will," said Bevis; "I will be very quiet."

"It is my turn to tell you a story now," said a green flag waving to and fro in the brook. "The Reed has been talking too much."

"No, it is my turn," said a perch from the water under the bank. Bevis leaned over a little, and could see the bars across his back and sides.

"Hold your tongue," replied the flag; "you ate the roach this morning, whose silvery scales used to flash like a light under the water."

"I will nibble you," said the perch, very angry. "I will teach you to tell tales."

"I will ask the willow, he is a very old friend of mine, not to shake any more insects into the brook for you from his leaves," replied the flag.

"It was not I who ate the roach," said the perch; "it was the pike, Bevis dear."

"Indeed it was not," said the pike, coming forward a little from under some floating weeds, where he had been in hiding, so that Bevis could now see his long body. "The perch says things that are not true."

"You know you hate me," said the perch; "because your great, great grandfather swallowed mine in a rage, and my great, great grandfather's spines stuck in your great, great grandfather's throat and killed him. And ever since then, Bevis dear, they have done nothing but tell tales against me. I

did not touch the roach, the pike wanted him, I know, for breakfast."

"I deny it," said the pike; "but if it was not the perch it was the Rat."

"That's false," said the Rat; "I have only this minute come down to the Brook. If it was not the pike nor the perch, depend upon it it was the heron."

"I am sure it was not the heron," said a beautiful drake, who came swimming down the stream. "I was here as early as any one, and I will not have my acquaintance the heron accused in his absence. I assure you it was not the heron."

"Well, who did it then?" said Bevis.

"The fact is," said a frog on the verge of the stream, "they are all as bad as one another; the perch is a rogue and a thief; the pike is a monster of iniquity; the heron never misses a chance of gobbling up somebody; and as for the drake, for all his glossy neck and his innocent look, he is as ready to pick up anything as the rest."

"Quack," cried the drake in a temper; "Quack."

"Hush!" said a tench from the bottom of a deep hole under the bank—he was always a peace-

maker. "Hush! do stop the noise you are making. If you would only lie quiet in the mud like me, how pleasant you would find life."

"Bevis," began the Reed; "Bevis dear, Ah, ah!" His voice died away, for as the sun got higher the Wind fell, and the Reed could only speak while the Wind blew. The flag laughed as the Reed was silenced.

"You need not laugh," said the perch; "you can only talk while the water waggles you. The horse will come down to the Brook to-morrow, and bite off your long green tip, and then you will not be able to start any more falsehoods about me."

"The birds are coming," said the frog. "I should like to swim across to the other side, where I can see better, but I am afraid of the pike and the drake. Bevis, dear, fling that piece of dead stick at them."

Bevis picked up the dead stick and flung it at the drake, who hastened off down the stream; the pike, startled at the splash, darted up the brook, and the frog swam over in a minute. Then the birds began to come down to the drinking-place, where

the shore shelved very gently, and the clear shallow water ran over the sandy bottom. They were all in their very best and brightest feathers, and as the sun shone on them and they splashed the water and strutted about, Bevis thought he had never seen anything so beautiful.

They did not all bathe, for some of them were specially permitted only to drink instead, but they all came, and all in their newest dresses. So bright was the goldfinch's wing, that the lark, though she did not dare speak, had no doubt she rouged. The sparrow, brushed and neat, so quiet and subdued in his brown velvet, looked quite aristocratic among so much flaunting colour. As for the blackbird, he had carefully washed himself in the spring before he came to bathe in the brook, and he glanced round with a bold and defiant air, as much as to say, "There is not one of you who has so yellow a bill, and so beautiful a black coat as I have." In the bush the bullfinch, who did not much care to mix with the crowd, moved restlessly to and fro. The robin looked all the time at Bevis, so anxious was he for admiration. The wood-pigeon, very consequential, affected not to see the dove, whom Bevis

longed to stroke, but could not, as he had promised the Reed to keep still.

All this time the birds, though they glanced at one another, and those who were on good terms, like the chaffinch and the greenfinch, exchanged a nod, had not spoken a word, and the Reed, as a puff came, whispered to Bevis that the prophecy would certainly come to pass, and they would all be as happy as ever they could be. Why ever did they not make haste and fly away, now they had all bathed or sipped? The truth was, they liked to be seen in their best feathers, and none of them could make up their minds to be the first to go home; so they strutted to and fro in the sunshine. Bevis, in much excitement, could hardly refrain from telling them to go.

He looked up into the sky and there was the Hawk, almost up among the white clouds, soaring round and round, and watching all that was proceeding. Almost before he could look down again a shadow went by, and a cuckoo flew along very low, just over the drinking-place.

"Cuckoo!" he cried, "Cuckoo! The goldfinch has the prettiest dress," and off he went.

Now the Hawk had bribed the cuckoo, who was his cousin, to do this, and the cuckoo was not at all unwilling, for he had an interest himself in keeping the birds divided, so he said that although he had made up his mind to go on his summer tour, leaving his children to be taken care of by the wagtail, he would stop a day or two longer, to manage this little business. No sooner had the cuckoo said this, than there was a most terrible uproar, and all the birds cried out at once. The blackbird was so disgusted, that he flew straight off, chattering all across the field and up the hedge. The bullfinch tossed his head, and asked the goldfinch to come up in the bush and see which was strongest. The greenfinch and the chaffinch shrieked with derision; the wood-pigeon turned his back, and said "Pooh!" and went off with a clatter. The sparrow flew to tell his mates on the house, and you could hear the chatter they made about it, right down at the Brook. But the wren screamed loudest of all, and said that the goldfinch was a painted impostor, and had not got half so much gold as the yellow-hammer. So they were all scattered in a minute, and Bevis stood up.

"Ah!" said the Reed, "I am very sorry. It

was the Hawk's doings, I am sure, and he was put up to the trick by the Weasel, and now the birds will never agree, for every year they will remember this. Is it not a pity they are so vain? Bevis, dear, you are going, I see. Come down again, dear, when the wind blows stronger, and I will tell you another story. Ah! ah!" he sighed; and was silent as the puff ceased.

Bevis, tired of sitting so long, went wandering up the Brook, peeping into the hollow willow trees, wishing he could dive like the rats, and singing to the Brook, who sang to him again, and taught him a very old tune. By-and-by he came to the hatch, where the Brook fell over with a splash, and a constant bubbling, and churning, and gurgling. A kingfisher, who had been perched on the rail of the hatch, flew off when he saw Bevis, whistling, "Weep! weep!"

"Why do you say, weep, weep," said Bevis; "Is it because the birds are so foolish?" But the kingfisher did not stay to answer. The water rushing over the hatch made so pleasant a sound that Bevis, delighted with its tinkling music, sat down to listen and to watch the bubbles, and see how far they

would swim before they burst. Then he threw little pieces of stick on the smooth surface above the hatch to see them come floating over and plunge under the bubbles, and presently appear again by the foam on the other side among the willow roots.

Still more sweetly sang the Brook, so that even restless Bevis stayed to hearken, though he could not quite make out what he was saying. A moorhen stole out from the rushes farther up, seeing that Bevis was still enchanted with the singing, and began to feed among the green weeds by the shore. A water-rat came out of his hole and fed in the grass close by. A blue dragon-fly settled on a water-plantain. Up in the ash-tree a dove perched and looked down at Bevis. Only the gnats were busy; they danced and danced till Bevis thought they must be dizzy, just over the water.

"Sing slower," said Bevis presently, "I want to hear what you are saying." So the Brook sang slower, but then it was too low, and he could not catch the words. Then he thought he should like to go over to the other side, and see what there was up the high bank among the brambles. He looked at the hatch, and saw that there was a beam across the

Brook, brown with weeds, which the water only splashed aginst and did not cover deeply. By holding tight to the rail and putting his feet on the beam he thought he could climb over.

He went down nearer and took hold of the rail, and was just going to put his foot on the beam, when the Brook stopped singing, and said, "Bevis, dear, do not do that; it is very deep here, and the beam is very slippery, and if you should fall I would hold you up as long as I could, but I am not very strong, and should you come to harm I should be very unhappy. Do please go back to the field, and if you will come down some day when I am not in such a hurry, I will sing to you very slowly, and tell you everything I know. And if you come very gently, and on tip-toe you will see the kingfisher, or perhaps the heron." Bevis, when he heard this, went back, and followed the hedge a good way, not much thinking where he was going, but strolling along in the shadow, and humming to himself the tune he had learnt from the brook. By-and-by he spied a gap in the hedge under an ash-tree, so he went through in a minute, and there was a high bank with trees like a copse, and bramble-bushes and ferns. He

went on up the bank, winding in and out the brambles, and at last it was so steep he had to climb on his hands and knees, and suddenly as he came round a bramble-bush there was the Longpond, such a great piece of water, all gleaming in the sunshine and reaching far away to the woods and the hills, as if it had no end.

Bevis clapped his hands with delight, and was just going to stand up, when something caught him by the ankles; he looked round, and it was the Bailiff, who had had an eye on him all the time from the hayfield. Bevis kicked and struggled, but it was no use, the Bailiff carried him home, and then went back with a bill-hook, and cutting a thorn bush, stopped up the gap in the hedge.

CHAPTER V.

KAPCHACK.

"Q—q—q," Bevis heard a starling say some weeks afterwards on the chimney-top one morning when he woke up. The chimney was very old and big, and the sound came down it to his room. "Q—q—q, my dear, I will tell you a secret"—he was talking to his lady-love.

"Phe-hu," she said, in a flutter. Bevis could hear her wings go plainly. "Whatever is it? Do tell me."

"Look all round first," he said, "and see that no one is about."

"No one is near, dear; the sparrows are out in the corn, and the swallows are very high up; the blackbird is busy in the orchard, and the robin is down at the red currants; there's no one near. Is it a very great secret?"

"It is a very great secret indeed, and you must be very careful not to whistle it out by accident;

now if I tell you will you keep your beak quite shut, darling?"

"Quite."

"Then, listen—Kapchack is in love."

"Phe—hu—u; who is it? Is he going to be married? How old is she? Who told you? When did you hear it? Whatever will people say? Tell me all about it, dear!"

"The tomtit told me just now in the fir-tree; the woodpecker told him on his promising that he would not tell anybody else."

"When is the marriage to come off, dear?" she asked, interrupting him. "Kapchack—Phe—u!"

Somebody came round the house, and away they flew, just as Bevis was going to ask all about it. He went to the window as soon as he was dressed, and as he opened it he saw a fly on the pane; he thought he would ask the fly, but instantly the fly began to fidget, and finding that the top of the window was open out he went, buzzing that Kapchack was in love. At breakfast time a wasp came in—for the fruit was beginning to ripen, and the wasps to get busy—and he went all round the room saying that Kapchack was in love, but he would

not listen to anything Bevis asked, he was so full of Kapchack. When Bevis ran out of doors the robin on the palings immediately said, "Kapchack is in love; do you know Kapchack is in love?" and a second afterwards the wren flew up to the top of the wood pile and cried out just the same thing.

Three finches passed him as he went up the garden, telling each other that Kapchack was in love. The mare in the meadow whinnied to her colt that Kapchack was in love, and the cows went "boo" when they heard it, and "booed" it to some more cows ever so far away. The leaves on the apple tree whispered it, and the news went all down the orchard in a moment; and everything repeated it. Bevis got into his swing, and as he swung to and fro he heard it all round him.

A humble-bee went along the grass telling all the flowers that were left, and then up into the elm, and the elm told the ash, and the ash told the oak, and the oak told the hawthorn, and it ran along the hedge till it reached the willow, and the willow told the Brook, and the Brook told the reeds, and the reeds told the kingfisher, and the kingfisher

went a mile down the stream and told the heron, and the heron went up into the sky and called it out as loud as he could, and a rabbit heard it and told another rabbit, and he ran across to the copse and told another, and he told a mouse, and he told a butterfly, and the butterfly told a moth, and the moth went into the great wood and told another moth, and a wood-pigeon heard it and told more wood-pigeons, and so everybody said "Kapchack is in love!"

"But I thought it was a great secret," said Bevis to a thrush, "and that nobody knew it, except the tomtit, and the woodpecker, and the starling; and, besides, who is Kapchack?" The thrush was in the bushes where they came to the haha, and when he heard Bevis ask who Kapchack was, he laughed, and said he should tell everybody that Bevis, who shot his uncle with the cannon-stick, was so very, very stupid he did not know who Kapchack was. Ha! Ha! Could anybody be so ignorant? he should not have believed it if he had not heard it.

Bevis, in a rage at this, jumped out of the swing and threw a stone at the thrush, and so well did he fling it that if the thrush had not slipped

under a briar he would have had a good thump. Bevis went wandering round the garden, and into his summer-house, when he heard some sparrows in the ivy on the roof all chattering about Kapchack, and out he ran to ask them, but they were off in a second to go and tell the yellow-hammers. Bevis stamped his foot, he was so cross because nobody would tell him about Kapchack, and he could not think what to do, till as he was looking round the garden he saw the rhubarb, and remembered the old Toad. Very likely the Toad would know; he was so old, and knew almost everything. Away he ran to the rhubarb and looked under the piece of wood, and there was the Toad asleep, just as he always was.

He was so firm asleep, he did not know what Bevis said, till Bevis got a twig and poked him a little. Then he yawned and woke up, and asked Bevis what time it was, and how long it would be before the moon rose.

"I want to know who Kapchack is, this minute," said Bevis, "this *very* minute, mind."

"Well I never!" said the Toad, "well I never! Don't you know?"

"Tell me directly—this very minute—you horrid old Toad!"

"Don't you really know?" said the Toad.

"I'll have you shovelled up, and flung over to the pigs, if you don't tell me," said Bevis. "No, I'll get my cannon-stick, and shoot you! No, here's a big stone—I'll smash you! I hate you! Who's Kapchack?"

"Kapchack," said the Toad, not in the least frightened, "Kapchack is the Magpie; and he is king over everything and everybody—over the fly and the wasp, and the finches, and the heron, and the horse, and the rabbit, and the flowers, and the trees. Kapchack, the great and mighty Magpie, is the king," and the Toad bumped his chin on the ground, as if he stood before the throne, so humble was he at the very name of Kapchack. Then he shut one eye in a very peculiar manner, and put out his tongue.

"Why, don't you like Kapchack?" said Bevis, who understood him in a minute.

"Hush!" said the Toad, and he repeated out loud, "Kapchack is the great and noble Magpie—Kapchack is the king!" Then he whispered to

Bevis to sit down on the grass very near him, so that he might speak to him better, and not much louder than a whisper. When Bevis had sat down and stooped a little, the Toad came close to the mouth of his hole, and said very quietly, "Bevis, dear, Kapchack is a horrid wretch!"

"Why," said Bevis, "why do you hate him? and where does he live? and why is he king? I suppose he is very beautiful?"

"Oh, dear, no!" said the Toad, hastily, "he is the ugliest creature that ever hopped. The feathers round one eye have all come out and left a bare place, and he is quite blind on the other. Indeed his left eye is gone altogether. His beak is chipped and worn; his wings are so beaten and decayed that he can hardly fly; and there are several feathers out of his tail. He is the most miserable thing you ever saw."

"Then why is he king?" said Bevis.

"Because he is," said the Toad; "and as he is king, nobody else can be. It is true he is very wise—at least everybody says so—wiser than the crow or the rook, or the Weasel (though the Weasel is so cunning). And besides, he is so old,

so very old, nobody knows when he was born, and they say that he will always live, and never die. Why, he put my grandfather in prison."

"In prison?" said Bevis. "Where is the prison?"

"In the elm tree, at the top of the Home Field," said the Toad. "My grandfather has been shut up there in a little dungeon so tight, he cannot turn round, or sit, or stand, or lie down, for so long a time that, really Bevis, dear, I cannot tell you; but it was before you were born. And all that time he has had nothing to eat or drink, and he has never seen the sun or felt the air, and I do not suppose he has ever heard anything unless when the thunderbolt fell on the oak, close by. Perhaps he heard the thunder then."

"Well, then, what has he been doing?" asked Bevis, "and why doesn't he get out?"

"He cannot get out, because the tree has grown all round him quite hard, as Kapchack knew it would when he ordered him to be put there in the hole. He has not been doing anything but thinking."

"I should get tired of thinking all that time," said Bevis; "but why was he put there?"

"For reasons of state," said the Toad. "He knows too much. Once upon a time he saw Kapchack do something, I do not know what it was, and Kapchack was very angry, and had him put in there in case he should tell other people. I went and asked him what it was before the tree quite shut him in, while there was just a little chink you could talk through; but he always told me to stop in my hole and mind my own business, else perhaps I should get punished, as he had been. But he did tell me that he could not help it, that he did not mean to see it, only just at the moment it happened he turned round in his bed, and he opened his eyes for a second, and you know the consequences, Bevis, dear. So I advise you always to look the other way, unless you're wanted."

"It was very cruel of Kapchack," said Bevis.

"Kapchack is very cruel," said the Toad, "and very greedy, more greedy even than the ants; and he has such a treasure in his palace as never was heard of. No one can tell how rich he is. And as for cruelty, why he killed his uncle only a week

since, just for not answering him the very instant he spoke; he pecked him in the forehead and killed him. Then he killed the poor little wren, whom he chanced to hear say that the king was not so beautiful as her husband. Next he pecked a thrush to death, because the thrush dared to come into his orchard without special permission.

"But it is no use my trying to tell you all the shameful things he has done in all these years. There is never a year goes by without his doing something dreadful; and he has made everybody miserable at one time or other by killing their friends or relations, from the snail to the partridge. He is quite merciless, and spares no one; why, his own children are afraid of him, and it is believed that he has pecked several of them to death, though it is hushed up; but people talk about it all the same, sometimes. As for the way he has behaved to the ladies, if I were to tell you you would never believe it."

"I hate him," said Bevis. "Why ever do they let him be king? How they must hate him."

"Oh, no they don't, dear," said the Toad. "If you were to hear how they go on, you would think

he was the nicest and kindest person that ever existed. They sing his praises all day long; that is, in the spring and summer, while the birds have their voices. You must have heard them, only you did not understand them. The finches and the thrushes, and the yellow-hammers and the wrens, and all the birds, every one of them, except Choo Hoo, the great rebel, sing Kapchack's praises all day long, and tell him that they love him more than they love their eggs or their wives, or their nests, and that he is the very best and nicest of all, and that he never did anything wrong, but is always right and always just.

"And they say his eye is brighter than the sun, and that he can see more with his one eye than all the other birds put together; and that his feathers are blacker and whiter and more beautiful than anything else in the world, and his voice sweeter than the nightingale's. Now, if you will stoop a little lower I will whisper to you the reason they do this (Bevis stooped down close); the truth is they are afraid lest he should come himself and peck their eggs, or their children, or their wives, or if not himself that he should send the Hawk, or the Weasel,

or the Stoat, or the Rat, or the Crow. Don't you ever listen to the Crow, Bevis; he is a black scoundrel.

"For Kapchack has got all the crows, and hawks, and weasels (especially that very cunning one, that old wretch that cheated you), and rats, to do just as he tells them. They are his soldiers, and they carry out his bidding quicker than you can wink your eye, or than I can shoot out my tongue, which I can do so quickly that you cannot see it. When the spring is over and the birds lose their voices (many of them have already), they each send one or two of their number every day to visit the orchard where Kapchack lives, and to say (as they can no longer sing) that they still think just the same, and they are all his very humble servants. Kapchack takes no notice of them whatever unless they happen to do what he does not like, and then they find out very soon that he has got plenty of spies about.

"My opinion is that the snail is no better than a spy and a common informer. Do you just look round and turn over any leaves that are near, lest any should be here, and tell tales about me. I can

tell you, it is a very dangerous thing to talk about Kapchack, somebody or other is sure to hear, and to go and tell him, so as to get into favour. Now, that is what I hate. All the rabbits and hares (and your friend the Hare that lives at the top of the Home Field), and the Squirrel and the Mouse, all of them have to do just the same as the birds, and send messages to Kapchack, praising him and promising to do exactly as he tells them, all except Choo Hoo."

"Who is Choo Hoo?" said Bevis.

"Choo Hoo is the great wood-pigeon," said the Toad. "He is a rebel; but I cannot tell you much about him, for it is only of late years that we have heard anything of him, and I do not know much about the present state of things. Most of the things I can tell you happened, or begun, a long time ago. If you want to know what is going on now, the best person you can go to is the Squirrel. He is a very good fellow; he can tell you. I will give you a recommendation to him, or perhaps he will be afraid to open his mouth too freely; for, as I said before, it is a very dangerous thing to talk about Kapchack, and every-

body is most terribly afraid of him—he is so full of malice."

"Why ever do they let him be king?" said Bevis; "I would not, if I were them. Why ever do they put up with him, and his cruelty and greediness? I will tell the thrush and the starling not to endure him any longer."

"Pooh! pooh!" said the Toad. "It is all very well for you to say so, but you must excuse me for saying, my dear Sir Bevis, that you really know very little about it. The thrush and the starling would not understand what you meant. The thrush's father always did as Kapchack told him, and sang his praises, as I told you, and so did his grandfather, and his great grandfather, and all his friends and relations, these years and years past. So that now the thrushes have no idea of there being no Kapchack. They could not understand you, if you tried to explain to them how nice it would be without him. If you sat in your swing and talked to them all day long, for all the summer through, they would only think you very stupid even to suppose such a state of things as no Kapchack. Quite impossible, Bevis, dear!—

excuse me correcting you. Why, instead of liking it, they would say it would be very dreadful to have no Kapchack."

"Well, they are silly!" said Bevis. "But *you* do not like Kapchack!"

"No, I do not," said the Toad; "and if you will stoop down again—— (Bevis stooped still nearer.) No; perhaps you had better lie down on the grass! There—now I can talk to you quite freely. The fact is, do you know, there are other people besides me who do not like Kapchack. The Crow—I can't have anything to do with such an old rogue! — the Crow, I am certain, hates Kapchack, but he dares not say so. Now I am so old, and they think me so stupid and deaf that people say a good deal before me, never imagining that I take any notice. And when I have been out of a dewy evening, I have distinctly heard the Crow grumbling about Kapchack. The Crow thinks he is quite as clever as Kapchack, and would make quite as good a king.

"Nor is the Rat satisfied, nor the Weasel, nor the Hawk. I am sure they are not, but they cannot do anything alone, and they are so suspicious

of each other they cannot agree. So that though they are dissatisfied, they can do nothing. I dare say Kapchack knows it very well indeed. He is so wise—so very, very wise—that he can see right into what they think, and he knows that they hate him, and he laughs in his sleeve. I will tell you what he does. He sets the Hawk on against the Rat, and the Rat on against the Crow, and the Crow against the Weasel. He tells them all sorts of things; so that the Weasel thinks the Crow tells tales about him, and the Hawk thinks the Rat has turned tail and betrayed his confidence. The result is, they hate one another as much as they hate him.

"And he told the Rat—it was very clever of him to do so, yes, it was very clever of him, I must admit that Kapchack is extremely clever—that if he was not king somebody else would be, perhaps the Hawk, or the Rat. Now the Rook told his friends at the rookery, and they told everybody else, and when people came to talk about it, they said it was very true. If Kapchack was not king, perhaps the Hawk would be, and he would be as bad, or worse; or the Rat, and he

would be very much worse; or perhaps the Weasel, the very worst of all.

"So they agreed that, rather than have these, they would have Kapchack as the least evil. When the Hawk and the Rat heard what the king had said, they hated each other ten times more than before, lest Kapchack—if ever he should give up the crown—should choose one or other of them as his successor, for that was how they understood the hint. Not that there is the least chance of his giving up the crown; not he, my dear, and he will never die, as everybody knows (here the Toad winked slightly), and he will never grow any older, all he does is to grow wiser, and wiser, and wiser, and wiser. All the other birds die, but Kapchack lives for ever. Long live the mighty Kapchack!" said the Toad very loud, that all might hear how loyal he was, and then went on speaking lower. "Yet the Hawk, and the Crow, and the Rook, and the Jay, and all of them, though they hate Kapchack in their hearts, all come round him bowing down, and they peck the ground where he has just walked, and kiss the earth he has stood on, in token of their humility and obedience to him. Each tries to outdo the rest in

servility. They bring all the news to the palace, and if they find anything very nice in the fields, they send a message to say where it is, and leave it for him, so that he eats the very fat of the land."

"And where is his palace?" asked Bevis. "I should like to go and see him."

"His palace is up in an immense old apple-tree, dear. It is a long way from here, and it is in an orchard, where nobody is allowed to go. And this is the strangest part of it all, and I have often wondered and thought about it months together, once I thought about it for a whole year, but I cannot make out why it is that the owner of the orchard, who lives in the house close by it, is so fond of Kapchack. He will not let anybody go into the orchard unless with him. He keeps it locked (there is a high wall around), and carries the key in his pocket.

"As the orchard is very big, and Kapchack's nest is in the middle, no one can even see it from the outside, nor can any boys fling a stone and hit it; nor, indeed, could any one shoot at it, because the boughs are all round it. Thus Kapchack's palace is protected with a high wall, by the boughs, by

its distance from the outside, by lock and key, and by the owner of the orchard, who thinks more of him than of all the world besides. He will not let any other big birds go into the orchard at all, unless Kapchack seems to like it; he will bring out his gun and shoot them. He watches over Kapchack as carefully as if Kapchack was his son. As for the cats he has shot for getting into the orchard, there must have been a hundred of them.

"So that Kapchack every year puts a few more sticks on his nest, and brings up his family in perfect safety, which is what no other bird can do, neither the rook, nor the hawk, nor the crow, nor could even the raven, when he lived in this country. This is a very great advantage to Kapchack, for he has thus a fortress to retreat to, into which no one can enter, and he can defy everybody; and this is a great help to him as king. It is also one reason why he lives so long, though perhaps there is another reason, which I cannot, really I dare not, even hint at; it is such a dreadful secret, I should have my head split open with a peck if I even so much as dared to think it. Besides which, perhaps it is not true.

"If it were not so far, and if there was not a wall round the orchard, I would tell you which way to go to find the place. His palace is now so big he can hardly make it any bigger lest it should fall; yet it is so full of treasures that it can barely hold them all. There are many who would like to rob him, I know. The Crow is one; but they dare not attempt it, not only for fear of Kapchack, but because they would certainly be shot.

"Everybody talks about the enormous treasure he has up there, and everybody envies him. But there are very dark corners in his palace, dark and blood-stained, for, as I told you, his family history is full of direful deeds. Besides killing his uncle, and, as is whispered, several of his children, because he suspected them of designs upon his throne, he has made away with a great many of his wives, I should think at least twenty. So soon as they begin to get old and ugly they die—people pretend the palace is not healthy to live in, being so ancient, and that that is the reason. Though doubtless they are very aggravating, and very jealous. Did you hear who it was Kapchack was in love with?"

"No," said Bevis. "The starling flew away

before I could ask him, and as for the rest they are so busy telling one another they will not answer me."

"One thing is very certain," said the Toad, "if Kapchack is in love you may be sure there will be some terrible tragedy in the palace, for his wife will be jealous, and besides that his eldest son and heir will not like it. Prince Tchack-tchack is not a very good temper—Tchack-tchack is his son, I should tell you—and he is already very tired of waiting for the throne. But it is no use his being tired, for Kapchack does not mean to die. Now Bevis, dear, I have told you everything I can think of, and I am tired of sitting at the mouth of this hole, where the sunshine comes, and must go back to sleep.

"But if you want to know anything about the present state of things (as I can only tell you what happened a long time since) you had better go and call on the Squirrel, and say I sent you, and he will inform you. He is about the best fellow I know; it is true he will sometimes bite when he is very frisky, it is only his play, but you can look sharp and put your hands in your pockets. He is the best of them all, dear; better than the Fox, or the Weasel,

or the Rat, or the Stoat, or the Mouse, or any of them. He knows all that is going on, because the starlings, who are extremely talkative, come every night to sleep in the copse where he lives, and have a long gossip before they go to sleep; indeed, all the birds go to the copse to chat, the rooks, the wood-pigeons, the pheasant, and the thrush, besides the rabbits and the hares, so that the Squirrel, to whom the copse belongs, hears everything."

"But I do not know my way to the copse," said Bevis, "please tell me the way."

"You must go up to the great oak-tree, dear," said the Toad, "where you once went to sleep, and then go across to the wheat-field, and a little farther you will see a footpath, which will take you to another field, and you will see the copse on your right. Now the way into the copse is over a narrow bridge, it is only a tree put across the ditch, and you must be careful how you cross it, and hold tight to the handrail, and look where you put your feet. It is apt to be slippery, and the ditch beneath is very deep; there is not much water, but a great deal of mud. I recollect it very well, though I have not been there for some time: I slipped off the bridge

one rainy night in the dark, and had rather a heavy fall. The bridge is now dry, and therefore you can pass it easily if you do not leave-go of the handrail. Good morning, dear, I feel so sleepy—come and tell me with whom Kapchack has fallen in love; and remember me to the Squirrel." So saying the Toad went back into his hole and went to sleep.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SQUIRREL.

All this talking had passed away the morning, but in the afternoon, when the sun got a little lower, and the heat was not quite so great, Bevis, who had not been allowed to go out at noon, came forth again, and at once started up the Home Field. He easily reached the great oak-tree, and from there he knew his way to the corner of the wheat-field, where he stopped and looked for the Hare, but she was not there, nor did she answer when he called to her. At the sound of his voice a number of sparrows rose from the wheat, which was now ripening, and flew up to the hedge, where they began to chatter about Kapchack's love affair.

Bevis walked on across the field, and presently found a footpath; he followed this, as the Toad had instructed him, and after getting over two stiles there was the copse on the right, though he had to climb over a high gate to get into the meadow next to it.

There was nothing in the meadow except a rabbit, who turned up his white tail and went into his hole, for having seen Bevis with the Hare, whom he did not like, the rabbit did not care to speak to Bevis. When Bevis had crossed the meadow he found, just as the Toad had said, that there was a very deep ditch round the copse, but scarcely any water in it, and that was almost hidden with weeds.

After walking a little way along the ditch he saw the tree which had been cut down and thrown across for a bridge. It was covered with moss, and in the shadow underneath it the hart's-tongue fern was growing. Remembering what the Toad had told him, Bevis put his hand on the rail—it was a willow pole—but found that it was not very safe, for at the end the wasps (a long time ago) had eaten it hollow, carrying away the wood for their nests, and what they had left had become rotten. Still it was enough to steady his footsteps, and taking care that he did not put his foot on a knot, Bevis got across safely. There was a rail to climb over on the other side, and then he was in the copse, and began to walk down a broad green path, a road which wound in among the ash-wood.

Nobody said anything to him, it was quite silent, so silent, that he could hear the snap of the dragon-fly's wing as he stopped in his swift flight and returned again. Bevis pulled a handful of long green rushes, and then he picked some of the burrs from the tall burdocks; they stuck to his fingers when he tried to fling them away, and would not go. The great thistles were ever so far above his head, and the humble-bees on them glanced down at him as he passed. Bevis very carefully looked at the bramble-bushes to see how the black-berries were coming on; but the berries were red and green, and the flowers had not yet all gone. There was such a beautiful piece of woodbine hanging from one of the ash-poles that he was not satisfied till he had gathered some of it; the long brome-grass tickled his face while he was pulling at the honey-suckle.

He clapped his hands when he found some young nuts; he knew they were not ripe, but he picked one and bit it with his teeth, just to feel how soft it was. There were several very nice sticks, some of which he had half a mind to stay and cut, and put his hand in his pocket for his knife, but there were so many things to look at, he thought he would go

on a little farther, and come back and cut them presently. The ferns were so tall and thick in many places that he could not see in among the trees. When he looked back he had left the place, where he came in, so far behind, that he could not see it, nor when he looked round could he see any daylight through the wood; there was only the sky overhead and the trees and ash-stoles, and bushes, and thistles, and long grass, and fern all about him.

Bevis liked it very much, and he ran on and kicked over a bunch of tawny fungus as he went, till by-and-by he came to a piece of timber lying on the ground, and sat down upon it. Some finches went over just then, they were talking about Kapchack as they flew, they went so fast he could not hear much. But the Squirrel was nowhere about; he called to him, but no one answered, and he began to think he should never find him, when presently, while he sat on the timber whistling very happily, something came round the corner, and Bevis saw it was the Hare.

She ran up to him quickly, and sat down at his feet, and he stroked her very softly. "I called for you at the wheat-field," he said, "but you were not there."

"No dear," said the Hare, "the truth is, I have been waiting for ever so long to come into the copse on a visit to an old friend, but you must know that the Weasel lives here."

"Does the Weasel live here?" said Bevis, starting up. "Tell me where, and I will kill him; I will cut off his head with my knife."

"I cannot tell you exactly, where he lives," said the Hare; "but it is somewhere in the copse. It is of no use your looking about; it is in some hole or other, quite hidden, and you would never find it. I am afraid to come into the copse while he is here; but this afternoon the dragon-fly brought me word that the Weasel had gone out. So I made haste to come while he was away, as I had not seen my old friend, the Squirrel, for ever so long, and I wanted to know if the news was true."

"Do you mean about Kapchack?" said Bevis. "I came to see the Squirrel, too, but I cannot find him."

"Yes, I mean about Kapchack," said the Hare. "Is it not silly of him to fall in love at his age? Why, he must be ten times as old as me! Really,

I sometimes think that the older people get the sillier they are. But it is not much use your looking for the Squirrel, dear. He may be up in the fir tree, or he may be in the beech, or he may have gone along the hedge. If you were by yourself, the best thing you could do would be to sit still where you are, and he would be nearly sure to come by, sooner or later. He is so restless, he goes all over the copse, and is never very long in one place. Since, however, you and I have met, I will find him for you, and send him to you."

"How long shall you be?" said Bevis. "I am tired of sitting here now, and I shall go on along the path."

"Oh, then," said the Hare, "I shall not know where to find you, and that will not do. Now, I know what I will do. I will take you to the raspberries, and there you can eat the fruit till I send the Squirrel."

The Hare leapt into the fern, and Bevis went after her. She led him in and out, and round the ash-stoles and bushes, till he had not the least idea which way he was going. After a time, they came

to an immense thicket of bramble and thorn, and fern growing up in it, and honeysuckle climbing over it.

"It is inside this thicket," said the Hare. "Let us go all round, and see if we can find a way in."

There was a place under an ash-stole, where Bevis could just creep beneath the boughs (the boughs held up the brambles), and after going on his hands and knees after the Hare a good way, he found himself inside the thicket, where there was an open space grown over with raspberry canes. Bevis shouted with delight as he saw the raspberries were ripe, and began to eat them at once.

"How ever did they get here?" he asked.

"I think it was the thrush," said the Hare. "It was one of the birds, no doubt. They take the fruit out of the orchards and gardens, and that was how it came here, I dare say. Now, don't you go outside the thicket till the Squirrel comes. And when you have quite done talking to the Squirrel, ask him to show you the way back to the timber, and there I will meet you, and lead you

to the wheat-field, where you can see the oak tree, and know your way home. Mind you do not go outside the thicket without the Squirrel, or you will lose your way, and wander about among the trees till it is night."

Off went the Hare to find the Squirrel, and Bevis set to work to eat as many of the raspberries as he could.

Among the raspberry canes he found three or four rabbit-holes, and hearing the rabbits talking to each other, he stooped down to listen. They were talking scandal about the Hare, and saying that she was very naughty, and rambled about too much. At this Bevis was very angry, and stamped his foot above the hole, and told them they ought to be ashamed of themselves for saying such things. The rabbits very much frightened, went down farther into their holes. After which Bevis ate a great many more raspberries, and presently, feeling very lazy, he lay down on some moss at the foot of an oak-tree, and kicked his heels on the ground, and looked up at the blue sky, as he always did when he wanted some one to speak to. He did not know how long he had been gazing at the sky,

when he heard some one say, "Bevis, dear!" and turning that way he saw the Squirrel, who had come up very quietly, and was sitting on one of the lower branches of the oak, close to him.

"Well, Squirrel," said Bevis, sitting up; "the Toad said I was to remember him to you. And now be very quick, and tell me all you know about Kapchack, and who it is he is in love with, and all about the rebel, Choo Hoo, and everything else, in a minute."

"Well, you are in a hurry," said the Squirrel, laughing; "and so am I, generally; but this afternoon I have nothing to do, and I am very glad you have come, dear. Now, first——"

"First," said Bevis, interrupting, "why did the starling say it was a great secret, when everybody knew it?"

"It was a great secret," said the Squirrel, "till Prince Tchack-tchack came down here (he is the heir, you know) in a dreadful fit of temper, and told the tomtit whom he met in the fir-tree, and the tomtit told the woodpecker, and the woodpecker told the starling, who told his lady-love on the chimney, and the fly heard him, and when you opened the

window the fly went out and buzzed it to everybody while you were at breakfast. By this time it is all over the world; and I daresay even the sea-gulls, though they live such a long way off, have heard it. Kapchack is beside himself with rage that it should be known, and Tchack-tchack is afraid to go near him. He made a great peck at Tchack-tchack just now."

"But why should there be so much trouble about it?" said Bevis.

"Oh," said the Squirrel, "it is a very serious business, let me tell you. It is not an ordinary falling in love, it is nothing less than a complete revolution of everything, and it will upset all the rules and laws that have been handed down ever since the world began."

"Dear me!" said Bevis. "And who is it Kapchack is in love with? I have asked twenty people, but no one will tell me."

"Why, I am telling you," said the Squirrel. "Don't you see, if it had been an ordinary affair—only a young magpie—it would not have mattered much, though I daresay the queen would have been jealous, but this——"

"Who is it?" said Bevis, in a rage. "Why don't you tell me who it is?"

"I am telling you," said the Squirrel, sharply.

"No, you're not. You're telling me a lot of things, but not what I want to know."

"Oh, well," said the Squirrel, tossing his head and swishing his tail, "of course, if you know more about it than I do it is no use my staying." So off he went in a pet.

Up jumped Bevis. "You're a stupid donkey," he shouted, and ran across to the other side, and threw a piece of stick up into an elm-tree after the Squirrel. But the Squirrel was so quick he could not see which way he had gone, and in half-a-minute he heard the Squirrel say very softly, "Bevis, dear," behind him, and looked back, and there he was sitting on the oak bough again.

The Squirrel, as the Toad had said, was really a very good fellow; he was very quick to take offence, but his temper only lasted a minute. "Bevis, dear," he said; "come back and sit down again on the moss, and I will tell you."

"I shan't come back," said Bevis, rather sulkily. "I shall sit here."

"No, no; don't stop there," said the Squirrel, very anxiously. "Don't stop there, dear; can't you see that great bough above you; that elm-tree is very wicked, and full of malice, do not stop there, he may hurt you."

"Pooh! what rubbish!" said Bevis; "I don't believe you. It is a very nice elm, I am sure. Besides, how can he hurt me? He has got no legs, and he can't run after me, and he has no hands and he can't catch me. I'm not a bit afraid of him;" and he kicked the elm with all his might. Without waiting a second, the Squirrel jumped down out of the oak and ran across and caught hold of Bevis by his stocking—he could not catch hold of his jacket—and tried to drag him away. Seeing the Squirrel in such an excited state, Bevis went with him to please him, and sat down on the moss under the oak. The Squirrel went up on the bough, and Bevis laughed at him for being so silly.

"Ah, but my dear Sir Bevis," said the Squirrel, "you do not know all, or you would not say what you did. You think because the elm has no legs, and cannot run after you, and because he has no hands, and cannot catch you, that therefore he can-

not do you any harm. You are very much mistaken; that is a very malicious elm, and of a very wicked disposition. Elms, indeed, are very treacherous, and I recommend you to have nothing to do with them, dear."

"But how could he hurt me?" said Bevis.

"He can wait till you go under him," said the Squirrel, "and then drop that big bough on you. He has had that bough waiting to drop on somebody for quite ten years. Just look up and see how thick it is, and heavy, why, it would smash a man out flat. Now, the reason the elms are so dangerous is because they will wait so long till somebody passes. Trees can do a great deal, I can tell you; why I have known a tree when it could not drop a bough, fall down altogether when there was not a breath of wind, nor any lightning, just to kill a cow or a sheep, out of sheer bad temper."

"But oaks do not fall, do they?" asked Bevis; looking up in some alarm at the oak above him.

"Oh, no," said the Squirrel; "the oak is a very good tree, and so is the beech and the ash, and many more (though I am not quite certain of the horse-chestnut, I have heard of his playing tricks), but

the elm is not; if he can he will do something spiteful. I never go up an elm if I can help it, not unless I am frightened by a dog or somebody coming along. The only fall I ever had was out of an elm.

"I ran up one in a hurry, away from that wretch, the Weasel (you know him), and put my foot on a dried branch, and the elm, like a treacherous thing as he is, let it go, and down I went crash, and should have hurt myself very much if my old friend the ivy had not put out a piece for me to catch hold of, and so just saved me. As for you, dear, don't you ever sit under an elm, for you are very likely to take cold there, there is always a draught under an elm on the warmest day.

"If it should come on to rain while you are out for a walk, be sure and not go under an elm for shelter if the wind is blowing, for the elm, if he possibly can, will take advantage of the storm to smash you.

"And elms are so patient, they will wait sixty or seventy years to do somebody an injury; if they cannot get a branch ready to fall they will let the rain in at a knot-hole, and so make it rotten inside,

though it looks green without, or ask some fungus to come up and grow there, and so get the bough ready for them. That elm across there is quite rotten inside—there is a hole inside so big you could stand up, and yet if anybody went by they would say what a splendid tree.

"But if you asked Kauhaha, the rook, he would shake his head, and decline to have anything to do with that tree. So my dear Sir Bevis, do not you think any more that because a thing has no legs, nor arms, nor eyes, nor ears, that therefore it cannot hurt you. There is the earth for instance; you may stamp on the earth with your feet and she will not say anything, she will put up with anything, but she is always lying in wait all the same, and if you could only find all the money she has buried you would be the richest man in the world; I could tell you something about that. The flints even—"

"Now I do not believe what you are going to say," said Bevis, "I am sure the flints cannot do anything, for I have picked up hundreds of them and flung them splash into the brook."

"But I assure you they can," said the Squirrel. "I will tell you a story about a flint that happened

only a short time since, and then you will believe. Once upon a time a waggon was sent upon the hills to fetch a load of flints, it was a very old waggon, and it wanted mending, for it belonged to a man who never would mend anything."

"Who was that?" said Bevis. "What a curious man."

"It was the same old gentleman (he is a farmer, only he is like your papa, Sir Bevis, and his land is his own), the same old gentleman who is so fond of Kapchack, whose palace is in his orchard. Well, the waggon went up on the hills, where the men had dug up some flints which had been lying quite motionless in the ground for so many thousand years that nobody could count them. There were at least five thousand flints, and the waggon went jolting down the hill and on to the road, and as it went the flints tried to get out, but they could not manage it, none but one flint, which was smaller than the rest.

"This one flint, of all the five thousand, squeezed out of a hole in the bottom of the waggon, and fell on the dust in the road, and was left there. There was not much traffic on the road (it is the

same, dear, that goes to Southampton, where the ships are), so that it remained where it fell. Only one waggon came by with a load of hay, and had the wheel gone over the flint of course it would have been crushed to pieces. But the waggoner, instead of walking by his horses, was on the grass at the side of the road talking to a labourer in the field, and his team did not pass on their right side of the road, but more in the middle, and so the flint was not crushed.

"In the evening, when it was dark, a very old and very wealthy gentleman came along in his dog-cart, and his horse, which was a valuable one, chanced to slip on the flint, which, being sharp and jagged, hurt its hoof, and down the horse fell. The elderly gentleman and his groom, who was driving, were thrown out, the groom was not hurt, but his master broke his arm, and the horse broke his knees. The gentleman was so angry that no sooner did he get home than he dismissed the groom, though it was no fault of his, for how could he see the flint in the night? Nor would he give the man a character, and the consequence was he could not find another place. He soon began to starve, and then he was

obliged to steal, and after a while he became a burglar.

"One night he entered a house in London, and was getting on well, and stealing gold watches and such things, when somebody opened the door and tried to seize him. Pulling out his pistol, he shot his assailant dead on the spot, and at once escaped, and has not since been heard of, though you may be sure if he is caught he will be hung, and they are looking very sharp after him, because he stole a box with some papers in it which are said to be of great value. And the person he shot was the same gentleman who had discharged him because the horse fell down. Now all this happened through the flint, and as I told you, Bevis dear, about the elm, the danger with such things is that they will wait so long to do mischief.

"This flint, you see, waited so many years that nobody could count them, till the waggon came to fetch it. They are never tired of waiting. Be very careful, Bevis dear, how you climb up a tree, or how you put your head out of window, for there is a thing that is always lying in wait, and will pull you down in a minute, if you do not take care. It has

been waiting there to make something fall ever since the beginning of the world, long before your house was built, dear, or before any of the trees grew. You cannot see it, but it is there, as you may prove by putting your cap out of window, which in a second will begin to fall down, as you would if you were tilted out.

"And I daresay you have seen people swimming, which is a very pleasant thing, I hear from the wild ducks; but all the time the water is lying in wait, and if they stop swimming a minute they will be drowned, and although a man very soon gets tired of swimming, the water never gets tired of waiting, but is always ready to drown him.

"Also, it is the same with your candle, Bevis dear, and this the bat told me, for he once saw it happen: looking in at a window as he flew by, and he shrieked as loud as he could, but his voice is so very shrill that it is not everybody can hear him, and all his efforts were in vain. For a lady had gone to sleep in bed and left her candle burning on the dressing-table, just where she had left it fifty times before, and found it burnt down to the socket in the morning, and no harm done. But that night

she had had a new pair of gloves, which were wrapped up in a piece of paper, and she undid these gloves and left the piece of paper underneath the candlestick, and yet it would not have hurt had the candle been put up properly, but instead of that a match had been stuck in at the side, like a wedge, to keep it up. When the flame came down to the match the match caught fire, and when it had burnt a little way down, that piece fell off, and dropped on the paper in which the gloves had been wrapped. The paper being very thin was alight in an instant, and from the paper the flame travelled to some gauze things hung on the looking-glass, and from that to the window curtains, and from the window curtains to the bed curtains, till the room was in a blaze, and though the bat shrieked his loudest the lady did not wake till she was very much burnt.

"Also with the sea; for the cod-fish told the sea-gull, who told the heron, who related the fact to the kingfisher, who informed me. The cod-fish was swimming about in the sea and saw a ship at anchor, and coming by the chain-cable the fish saw that one of the links of the chain was nearly eaten through with rust; but as the wind was calm it did

not matter. Next time the ship came there to anchor the cod-fish looked again; and the rust had gone still further into the link. A third time the ship came back to anchor there, and the sailors went to sleep thinking it was all right, but the cod-fish swam by and saw that the link only just held. In the night there came a storm, and the sailors woke up to find the vessel drifting on the rocks, where she was broken to pieces, and hardly any of them escaped.

"Also, with Living Things, Bevis dear; for there was once a little creeping thing (the sun-beetle told me he heard it from his grandfather) which bored a hole into a beam under the floor of a room—the hole was so tiny you could scarcely see it, and the beam was so big twenty men could not lift it. After the creeping thing had bored this little hole it died, but it left ten children, and they bored ten more little holes, and when they died they left ten each, and they bored a hundred holes, and left a thousand, and they bored a thousand holes, and they left a thousand tens, who bored ten thousand holes, and left ten thousand tens, and they bored one hundred thousand holes, and left one hundred thousand tens, and they bored a million holes; and when a great

number of people met in the room to hear a man speak, down the beam fell crash, and they were all dreadfully injured.

"Now, therefore, Bevis, my dear little Sir Bevis, do you take great care and never think any more that a thing cannot hurt you, because it has not got any legs, and cannot run after you, or because it has no hands, and cannot catch you, or because it is very tiny, and you cannot see it, but could kill a thousand with the heel of your boot. For as I told you about the malice-minded elm, all these things are so terribly dangerous, because they can wait so long, and because they never forget.

"Therefore, if you climb up a tree, be sure and remember to hold tight, and not forget, for the earth will not forget, but will pull you down to it thump, and hurt you very much. And remember if you walk by the water that it is water, and do not forget, for the water will not forget, and if you should fall in, will let you sink and drown you. And if you take a candle be careful what you are doing, and do not forget that fire will burn, for the fire will not forget, but will always be on the look out and ready, and will burn you without mercy. And be sure to

see that no little unseen creeping thing is at work, for they are everywhere boring holes into the beam of life till it cracks unexpectedly; but you must stay till you are older, and have eaten the peck of salt your papa tells you about before you can understand all that. Now,"——

"But," said Bevis, who had been listening to the story very carefully, "you have not told me about the wind. You have told me about the earth, and the water, and the fire, but you have not said anything about the wind."

"No more I have," said the Squirrel. "You see I forget, though the earth does not, neither does the water, nor the fire. Well, the Wind is the nicest of all of them, and you need never be afraid of the Wind, for he blows so sweetly, and brings the odour of flowers, and fills you with life, and joy, and happiness. And oh, Bevis dear, you should listen to the delicious songs he sings, and the stories he tells as he goes through the fir-tree and the oak. Of course if you are on the ground, so far below, you can only hear a sound of whispering, unless your ears are very sharp; but if you were up in the boughs with me,

you would be enchanted with the beauty of his voice.

"No, dear, never be afraid of the Wind, but put your doors open and let him come in, and throw your window open and let him wander round the room, and take your cap off sometimes, and let him stroke your hair. The Wind is a darling —I love the Wind, and so do you, dear, for I have seen you racing about when the Wind was rough, chasing the leaves and shouting with delight. Now with the Wind it is just the reverse to what it is with all the others. If you fall on the earth it thumps you; into the water, it drowns you; into the fire, it burns you; but you cannot do without wind.

"Always remember that you must have wind, dear, and do not get into a drawer, as I have heard of boys doing, from the Mouse, who goes about a good deal indoors, and being suffocated for want of wind; or into a box, or a hole, or anywhere where there is no wind. It is true he sometimes comes along with a most tremendous push, and the trees go cracking over. That is only because they are malice-minded, and are rotten at the

heart; and the boughs break off, that is only because they have invited the fungus to grow on them; and the thatch on your papa's ricks is lifted up at the corner just as if the Wind had chucked them under the chin.

"But that is nothing. Everybody loses his temper now and then, and why not the Wind? You should see the nuts he knocks down for me where I could not very well reach them, and the showers of acorns, and the apples! I take an apple out of your orchard, dear, sometimes, but I do not mean any harm—it is only one or two. I love the Wind! But do not go near an elm, dear, when the wind blows, for the elm, as I told you, is a malicious tree, and will seize any pretence, or a mere puff, to do mischief."

"I love the Wind, too!" said Bevis. "He sings to me down the chimney, and hums to me through the door, and whistles up in the attic, and shouts at me from the trees. Oh, yes, I will do as you say; I will always have plenty of the Wind. You are a very nice Squirrel. I like you very much; and you have a lovely silky tail. But you have not told me yet who it is Kapchack is in love with."

"I have been telling you all the time," said the Squirrel; "but you are in such a hurry; and, as I was saying, if it was only a young magpie, now—only an ordinary affair—very likely the queen would be jealous, indeed, and there would be a fight in the palace, which would be nothing at all new, but this is much more serious, a very serious matter, and none can tell how it will end. As Kauc, the crow, was saying to Cloctaw, the jackdaw, this morning——"

"But who is it?" asked Bevis, jumping up again in a rage.

"Why, everybody knows who it is," said the Squirrel; "from the ladybird to the heron; from the horse to the mouse; and everybody is talking of it, and as since the Raven went away, there is no judge to settle any dispute—"

"I hate you!" said Bevis, "you do talk so much; but you do not tell me what I want to know. You are a regular donkey, and I will pull your tail."

He snatched at the Squirrel's tail, but the Squirrel was too quick; he jumped up the boughs and showed his white teeth, and ran away in a temper.

Bevis looked all round, but could not see him, and as he was looking, a dragon-fly came and said that the Squirrel had sent him to say that he was very much hurt, and thought Bevis was extremely rude to him, but he had told the dragon-fly to show him the way to the piece of timber, and if he would come back to-morrow, and not be so rude, he should hear all about it. So the dragon-fly led Bevis to the piece of timber, where the Hare was waiting, and the Hare led him to the wheat-field, and showed him the top of the great oak-tree, and from there he easily found his way home to tea.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COURTIERS.

The next morning passed quickly, Bevis having so much to do. Hur-hur, the pig, asked him to dig up some earth-nuts for him with his knife, for the ground was hard from the heat of the sun, and he could not thrust his snout in. Then Pan, the spaniel, had to be whipped very severely because he would not climb a tree; and so the morning was taken up. After the noontide heat had decreased, Bevis again started, and found his way by the aid of the oak to the corner of the wheat-field. The dragon-fly was waiting for him with a message from the Hare, saying that she had been invited to a party on the hills, so the dragon-fly would guide him into the copse.

Flying before him, the dragon-fly led the way, often going a long distance ahead, and coming back in a minute, for he moved so rapidly it was not possible for Bevis to keep pace with him, and he was

too restless to stand still. Bevis walked carefully over the bridge, holding to the rail, as the Toad had told him; and passing the thistles, and the grass, and the ferns, came to the piece of timber. There he sat down to rest, while the dragon-fly played to and fro, now rising to the top of the trees, and now darting down again, to show off his dexterity. While he was sitting there a crow came along and looked at him hard, but said nothing; and immediately afterwards a jackdaw went over, remarking what a lovely day it was.

"Now take me to the raspberries," said Bevis; and the dragon-fly, winding in and out the trees, brought him to the thicket, showed him the place to creep in, and left, promising to return by-and-by and fetch him when it was time to go home. Bevis, warm with walking in the sunshine, after he had crept into the raspberries, went across and sat down on the moss under the oak; and he had hardly leant his back against the tree than the Squirrel came along on the ground and sat beside him.

"You are just in time, my dear," he said, speaking low and rapidly, and glancing round to see that no one was near; "for there is going to be a

secret council of the courtiers this afternoon, while Kapchack takes his nap; and in order that none of the little birds may play the spy and carry information to the police, Kauc, the crow, has been flying round and driving them away, so that there is not so much as a robin left in the copse. This is an employment that suits him very well, for he loves to play the tyrant. Perhaps you saw him coming in. And this council is about Kapchack's love affair, and to decide what is to be done, and whether it can be put up with, or whether they must refuse to receive her."

"And who is she?" said Bevis; "you keep on talking, but you do not tell me." The Squirrel pricked up his ears and looked cross, but he heard the people coming to the council, and knew there was no time to be lost in quarrelling, so he did not go off in a pet this time. "The lady is the youngest jay, dear, in the wood; La Schach is her name; she is sweetly pretty, and dresses charmingly in blue and brown. She is sweetly pretty, though they say rather a flirt, and flighty in her ways. She has captivated a great many with her bright colour, and now this toothless old Kapchack—but hush! It is a

terrible scandal. I hear them coming; slip this way, Bevis dear."

Bevis went after him under the brambles and the ferns till he found a place in a hollow ash-stole, where it was hung all round with honeysuckle, and then, doing as the Squirrel told him, he sat down, and was quite concealed from sight; while the Squirrel stopped on a bough just over his head, where he could whisper and explain things. Though Bevis was himself hidden, he could see very well; and he had not been there a minute before he heard a rustling, and saw the Fox come stealthily out from the fern, and sit under an ancient hollow pollard close by.

The Stoat came close behind him; he was something like the Weasel, and they say a near relation; he is much bolder than the Weasel, but not one quarter so cunning. He is very jealous, too, of the power the Weasel has got on account of his cunning, and if he could he would strangle his kinsman. The Rat could not attend, having very important business at the brook that day, but he had sent the Mouse to listen and tell him all that was said. The Fox looked at the Mouse askance from

the corner of his eye; and the Stoat could not refrain from licking his lips, though it was well understood that at these assemblies all private feelings were to be rigidly suppressed. So that the Mouse was quite safe; still, seeing the Fox's glance, and the Stoat's teeth glistening, he kept very near a little hole under a stole, where he could rush in if alarmed.

"I understood Prince Tchack-tchack was coming," said the Fox, "but I don't see him."

"I heard the same thing," said the Stoat. "He's very much upset about this business."

"Ah," said the Fox, "perhaps he had an eye himself to this beautiful young creature. Depend upon it there's more under the surface than we have heard of yet." Just then a message came from the Weasel regretting very much that he could not be present, owing to indisposition, but saying that he quite agreed with all that was going to be said, and that he would act as the others decided, and follow them in all things. This message was delivered by a humble-bee, who having repeated all the Weasel had told him to, went buzzing on among the thistles.

"I do not quite like this," said a deep hollow voice; and looking up, Bevis saw the face of the Owl at the mouth of a hole in the pollard-tree. He was winking in the light, and could not persuade himself to come out, which was the reason the council was held at the foot of his house, as it was necessary he should take part in it. "I do not quite like this," said the Owl, very solemnly. "Is the Weasel sincere in all he says? Is he really unwell, or does he keep away in order that if Kapchack hears of this meeting he may say, 'I was not there. I did not take any part in it?'"

"That is very likely," said the Stoat. "He is capable of anything—I say it with sorrow, as he is so near a relation, but the fact is, gentlemen, the Weasel is not what he ought to be, and has, I am afraid, much disgraced our family."

"Let us send for the Weasel," said the Hawk, who just then came and alighted on the tree above the Owl. "Perhaps the Squirrel, who knows the copse so well, will go and fetch him."

"I really do not know where he lives," said the Squirrel. "I have not seen him lately, and I am afraid he is keeping his bed." Then the Squirrel whispered

down to Bevis, "That is not all true, but you see I am obliged not to know too much, else I should offend somebody and do myself no good."

"Well, then," said the Rook, who had just arrived, "send the Mouse; he looks as if he wanted something to do."

"I cannot agree to that," said the Owl, "the Mouse is very clever, and his opinion worthy of attention; we cannot spare him." The truth was, the Owl, squinting down, had seen what a plump Mouse it was, and he reflected that if the Weasel saw him he would never rest till he had tasted him, whereas he thought he should like to meet the Mouse by moonlight shortly. "Upon the whole, I really don't know that we need send for the Weasel," he went on; thinking that if the Weasel came he would fasten his affections upon the Mouse.

"But I do," said the Stoat.

"And so do I," said the Fox.

"And I," said Kaue, the crow; settling down on a branch of the pollard.

"For my part," said Cloctaw, the old jackdaw, taking his seat on a branch of horse-chestnut, "I think it very disrespectful of the Weasel."

"True," said the wood-pigeon. "True-whoo," as he settled on the ash.

"Quite true-oo," repeated the dove; perching in the hawthorn.

"Send for the Weasel, then," said a missel-thrush, also perching in the hawthorn. "Why all this delay? I am for action. Send for the Weasel immediately."

"Really, gentlemen," said the Mouse, not at all liking the prospect of a private interview with the Weasel, "you must remember that I have had a long journey here, and I am not quite sure where the Weasel lives at present."

"The council is not complete without the Weasel," screamed a Jay, coming up; he was in a terrible temper, for the lady jay whom Kapchack was in love with had promised him her hand, till the opportunity of so much grandeur turned her head, and she jilted him like a true daughter of the family, as she was. For the jays are famous for jilting their lovers. "If the Mouse is afraid," said the Jay, "I'll fetch the Humble-bee back, and if he wont come I 'll speak a word to my friend the shrike, and have him spitted on a thorn in a minute." Off he flew, and the

Humble-bee, dreadfully frightened, came buzzing back directly.

"It falls upon you, as the oldest of the party, to give him his commands," said Tchink, the chaffinch, addressing the Owl. The Owl looked at the Crow, and the Crow scowled at the chaffinch, who turned his back on him, being very saucy. He had watched his opportunity while the Crow went round the copse to drive away the small birds, and slipped in to appear at the council. He was determined to assert his presence, and take as much part as the others in these important events. If the goldfinches, and the thrushes, and blackbirds, and robins, and greenfinches, and sparrows, and so on, were so meek as to submit to be excluded, and were content to have no voice in the matter till they were called upon to obey orders, that was their affair. They were a bevy of poor-spirited, mean things. He was not going to be put down like that. Tchink was, indeed, a very impudent fellow: Bevis liked him directly, and determined to have a chat with him by-and-by.

"If I am the oldest of the party, it is scarcely competent for you to say so," said the Owl with

great dignity, opening his eyes to their full extent, and glaring at Tchink.

"All right, old spectacles," said Tchink, "you're not a bad sort of fellow by daylight, though I have heard tales of your not behaving quite so properly at night." Then catching sight of Bevis (for Tchink was very quick) he flew over and settled near the Squirrel, intending, if any violence was offered to him, to ask Bevis for protection.

The Owl, seeing the Fox tittering, and the Crow secretly pleased at this remark, thought it best to take no notice, but ordered the Humble-bee, in the name of the council, to at once proceed to the Weasel, and inform him that the council was unable to accept his excuses, but was waiting his arrival.

"Is Tchack-tchack coming?" asked the Mouse, recovering his spirits now.

"I too-whoo should like to know if Tchack-tchack is coming," said the wood-pigeon.

"And I so, too-oo," added the dove. "It seems to me a most important matter."

"In my opinion," said Cloctaw, speaking rather huskily, for he was very old, "Tchack-tchack will not come. I know him well—I can see through him—

he is a double-faced rascal like—like (he was going to say the Fox, but recollected himself in time) his —well, never matter; like all his race then. My opinion is he started the rumour that he was coming just to get us together, and encourage us to conspire against his father, in the belief that the heir was with us and approved of our proceedings. But he never really meant to come."

"The jackdaw is very old," said the Crow, with a sneer. "He is not what he used to be, gentlemen; you must make allowance for his infirmities."

"It seems to me," said the missel-thrush, interrupting, "that we are wasting a great deal of time. I propose that we at once begin the discussion, and then if the Weasel and Tchack-tchack come they can join in. I regret to say that my kinsman, the missel-thrush, who frequents the orchard (by special permission of Kapchack, as you know) is not here. The pampered fawning wretch! — I hate such favourites—they disgrace a court. Why all the rest of our family are driven forth like rogues, and are not permitted to come near! If the tyrant kills his children in his wanton freaks even then this minion remains loyal: despicable being! But now without

further delay let us ask the Owl to state the case plainly, so that we can all understand what we are talking about."

"Hear, hear," said Tchink.

"I agree too," said the wood-pigeon.

"I too," said the dove.

"It is no use waiting for Tchack-tchack," said the Hawk.

"Hum! haw! caw!" said the Rook, "I do not know about that."

"Let us go on to business," said the Stoat, "the Weasel knows no more than we do. His reputation is much greater than he deserves."

"I have heard the same thing," said the Fox. "Indeed I think so myself."

"I am sure the Owl will put the case quite fairly," said the Mouse, much pleased that the Owl had saved him from carrying the message to the Weasel.

"*We* are all waiting, Owl," said Tchink.

"*We*, indeed," said the Hawk, very sharply.

"Hush! hush!" said the Squirrel. "This is a privileged place, gentlemen; no personal remarks, if you please."

"I think, think, the Owl is very stupid not to begin," said the Chaffinch.

"If you please," said the Fox, bowing most politely to the Owl, "we are listening."

"Well then, gentlemen, since you all wish it," said the Owl, ruffling out his frills and swelling up his feathers, "since you all wish it, I will endeavour to put the case as plainly as possible, and in as few words as I can. You must understand, gentlemen, indeed you all understand already, that from time immemorial, ever since the oak bore acorns, and the bramble blackberries, it has been the established custom for each particular bird and each particular animal to fall in love with, and to marry some other bird or animal of the same kind.

"To explain more fully, so that there cannot by any possibility be the least chance of any one mistaking my meaning, I should illustrate the position in this way, that it has always been the invariable custom for owls to marry owls; for crows to marry crows; for rooks to fall in love with rooks; for wood-pigeons to woo wood-pigeons; doves to love doves; missel-thrushes to court lady missel-thrushes; jackdaws, jackdaws; hawks, hawks; rats, rats; foxes,

foxes; stoats, stoats; weasels, weasels; squirrels, squirrels; for jays, to marry jays ('Just so,' screamed the Jay); and magpies to marry magpies."

"And chaffinches to kiss chaffinches," added Tchink; determined not to be left out.

"This custom," continued the Owl, "has now existed so long, that upon looking into the archives of my house, and turning over the dusty records, not without inconvenience to myself, I can't discover one single instance of a departure from it since history began. There is no record, gentlemen, of any such event having taken place. I may say, without fear of contradiction, that no precedent exists. We may, therefore, regard it as a fixed principle of common law, from which no departure can be legal, without the special and express sanction of all the nation, or of its representatives assembled. We may even go farther, and hazard the opinion, not without some authority, that even with such sanction, such departure from constitutional usage could not be sustained were an appeal to be lodged.

"Even the high court of representatives of all the nation, assembled in the fulness of their

power, could not legalise what is in itself and of its own nature, illegal. Customs of this kind, which are founded upon the innate sense and feeling of every individual, cannot, in short, be abolished by Act of Parliament. Upon this all the authorities I have consulted are perfectly agreed. What has grown up during the process of so many generations, cannot be now put on one side. This, gentlemen, is rather an abstruse part of the question, being one which recommends itself for consideration to the purely legal intellect. It is a matter, too, of high state policy which rises above the knowledge of the common herd. We may take it for granted, and pass on from the general to the special aspect of this most remarkable case.

"What do we see? We see a proposed alliance between an august magpie and a beautiful jay. Now we know by experience that what the palace does one day, the world at large will do to-morrow. It is the instinct of nature to follow the example of those set so high above us. We may therefore conclude, without fear of contradiction, that this alliance will be followed by others equally opposed to tradition. We shall have hundreds of other

equally ill-assorted unions. If it could be confined to this one instance, a dispensation might doubtless be arranged. I, for one, should not oppose it. ('I hate you!' shouted the Jay.) But no one can for a moment shut his eye to what must happen. We shall have, as I before remarked, hundreds of these ill-assorted unions.

"Now I need not enlarge upon the unhappy state of affairs which would thus be caused: the family jars, the shock to your feelings, the pain that must be inflicted upon loving hearts. With that I have nothing to do. It may safely be left to your imagination. But what I, as a statesman and a lawyer, have to deal with, is the legal, that is the common sense view of the situation, and my first question is this: I ask myself, and I beg you, each of you, to ask yourselves—I ask myself what effect would these ill-assorted unions produce upon the inheritance of property?"

"True—whoo!" said the wood-pigeon.

"Hum! Haw!" said the Rook.

"Law-daw!" said Cloctaw.

"Very important, very!" said the Fox. "The sacred laws of property cannot with safety be interfered with."

"No intrusion can be thought of for a moment," said the Stoat.

"Most absurd!" said the Jay.

"The very point!" said the missel-thrush.

"Very clear, indeed!" said the Mouse; "I am sure the Rat will echo the sentiment."

"Every one will agree with you," said Ki Ki, the Hawk.

"I think the same," said the chaffinch.

"The question is undoubtedly very important," continued the Owl, when the buzz had subsided, and much pleased at the sensation he had caused. "You all agree that the question is not one to be lightly decided or passed over. In order to fully estimate the threatened alteration in our present system, let us for a moment survey the existing condition of affairs. I, myself, to begin with, I and my ancestors, for many generations, have held undisputed possession of this pollard. Not the slightest flaw has ever been discovered in our title-deeds; and no claimant has ever arisen. The Rook has had, I believe, once or twice some little difficulty respecting his own particular tenancy, which is not a freehold; but his townsmen, as a body,

possess their trees in peace. The Crow holds an oak; the wood-pigeon has an ash; the missel-thrush a birch; our respected friend the Fox here, has a burrow which he inherited from a deceased rabbit, and he has also contingent claims on the witheybed, and other property in the country; the Stoat has a charter of free warren."

"And I have an elm," said Tchink, "let anybody come near it, that's all."

"The Squirrel," continued the Owl, "has an acknowledged authority over this copse; and the Jay has three or four firs of his own."

"And St. Paul belongs to me," said Cloctaw, the jackdaw.

"Well, now," said the Owl, raising his voice and overpowering the husky Cloctaw, "about these various properties little or no dispute can take place; the son succeeds to the father, and the nephew to the uncle. Occasional litigation, of course, occurs, which I have often had the pleasure of conducting to an amicable and satisfactory termination. But, upon the whole, there is very little difficulty; and the principle of inheritance is accepted by all. Your approval, indeed, has just been signified in the

most unanimous manner. But what shall we see if the example set by the palace spreads among society? The ash at the present moment is owned by the wood-pigeon; were the wood-pigeon's heir to marry the missel-thrush's heiress, just imagine the conflicting claims which would arise?

"The family would be divided amongst itself; all the relations upon the paternal side, and the relations upon the maternal side, would join the contest, and peace would be utterly at an end. And so in all other instances. The crow would no longer have a fee-simple of the oak, the jackdaw of the steeple, the rook of the elm, the fox of the burrow, or I of my pollard. We might even see the rook claiming the— But I will not follow the illustration farther, lest I be charged with descending to personalities. I will only add, in conclusion, that if this ill-fated union takes place, we must look forward to seeing every home broken up, our private settlements, our laws of hereditary succession set upon one side, our property divided among a miscellaneous horde of people, who will not know their own grandfathers, and our most cherished sentiments cast to the winds of heaven." With which words the Owl concluded,

and was greeted with marks of approval from all parts of the circle.

"We are all very much indebted to the Owl," said the Fox, "for putting the true aspect of the case so clearly before us. His learned discourse—not more learned than lucid—has convinced us all of the extreme inexpediency of this alliance."

"If this course is persisted in," said the Crow, "it can only end, in my opinion, in a way disastrous to the state. The king cannot decline to listen to our representations, if we are united."

"Haw!" said the Rook; "I'm not so sure of that. Kapchack likes his own way."

"Kapchack is very self-willed," said the Hawk. "It is almost our turn to have our way once now."

"So I should say," screamed the Jay; who could never open his beak without getting into a temper. "So I should say; Kapchack is a wicked old—"

"Hush, hush," said the Squirrel; "you can't tell who may be listening."

"I don't care," said the Jay, ruffling up his feathers; "Kapchack is a wicked old fellow, and Tchack-tchack is as bad."

"Capital!" said Tchink, the chaffinch; "I like

outspoken people. But I have heard that you (to the Jay) are very fond of flirting." At this there would have been a disturbance, had not the Fox interfered.

"We shall never do anything, unless we agree amongst ourselves," he said. "Now, the question is, are we going to do anything?"

"Yes, that is it," said the missel-thrush, who hated talking, and liked to be doing; "what is it we are going to do?"

"Something must be done," said the Owl, very solemnly.

"Yes; something must be done," said Cloctaw.

"Something must be done," said Ki Ki.

"I think, think so," said Tchink.

"I, too," said the dove.

"Quite true," said the wood-pigeon.

"Something must be done," said the Stoat.

"Let us tell Kapchack what we think," said the Mouse, getting bold, as he was not eaten.

"A good idea," said the Crow; "a very good idea. We will send the Mouse with a message."

"Dear me! No, no," cried the Mouse, terribly frightened; "Kapchack is awful in a rage—my life

would not be worth a minute's purchase. Let the Stoat go."

"Not I," said the Stoat; "I have had to suffer enough already, on account of my relation to that rascal the Weasel, whom Kapchack suspects of designs upon his throne. I will not go."

"Nor I," said the Fox; "Kapchack has looked angrily at me for a long time—he cannot forget my royal descent. Let the Hawk go."

"I! I!" said Ki Ki. "Nonsense; Kapchack does not much like me now; he gave me a hint the other day not to soar too high. I suppose he did not like to think of my overlooking him kissing pretty La Schach."

"Wretch! horrid wretch!" screamed the Jay, at the mention of the kissing, in a paroxysm of jealousy. "Pecking is too good for him!"

"Send the Jackdaw or the Crow," said Ki Ki.

"No, no," said Kauc and Cloctaw together. "Try the wood-pigeon."

"I go?—whoo," said the pigeon. "Impossible. Kapchack told me to my face the other day that he more than half suspected me of plotting to go over to Choo Hoo. I dare not say such a thing to him."

"Nor I," said the dove. "Why not the Owl?"

"The fact is," said the Owl, "my relations with Kapchack are of a peculiar and delicate nature. Although I occupy the position of a trusted counsellor, and have the honour to be chief secretary of state, that very position forbids my taking liberties, and it is clear if I did, and were in consequence banished from the court, that I could not plead your cause. Now, the Rat——"

"I am sure the Rat will not go," said the Mouse. "My friend the Rat is very particularly engaged, and could not possibly stir from home at this juncture. There is the missel-thrush."

"Ridiculous," said the missel-thrush. "Everybody knows I had to leave my hawthorn-tree because Prince Tchack-tchack took a fancy to it. He would very likely accuse me to his father of high treason, for he hates me more than poison ever since he did me that injury, and would lose no chance of compassing my destruction. Besides which my relative—the favourite—would effectually prevent me from obtaining an audience. Now, there's the Squirrel."

"My dear sir," said the Squirrel, "it is well known

I never meddle with politics. I am most happy to see you all here, and you can have the use of my copse at any time, and I may say further that I sympathise with your views in a general way. But on no account could I depart from my principles."

"His principles," muttered the Crow, always a cynical fellow. "His principles are his own beech-trees. If anybody touched them he would not object to politics then."

"This is rather awkward," said the Owl. "There seems an embarrassment on the part of all of us, and we must own that to venture into the presence of a despotic monarch with such unpleasant advice requires no slight courage. Now, I propose that since the Weasel has attained so high a reputation for address, that he be called upon to deliver our message."

"Hear, hear," said the Fox.

"Hear, hear," said the Stoat.

"Capital," said the Chaffinch. "Old Spectacles can always see a way out of a difficulty."

"Haw!" said the Rook. "I'm doubtful. Perhaps the Weasel will not see it in this light."

"Buzz," said the Humble-bee, just then returning. "Gentlemen, I have seen the Weasel. His lordship was lying on a bank in the sun—he is very ill indeed. His limbs are almost powerless; he has taken a chill from sleeping in a damp hole. He sends his humble apology, and regrets he cannot move. I left him licking his helpless paw. Buzz, buzz."

"Hark! hark!" said the Woodpecker; bursting into the circle with such a shout and clatter that the dove flew a little way in alarm. "Kapchack is waking up. I have been watching all the time to let you know. And there is no chance of Prince Tchack-tchack coming, for he told me that Kapchack ordered him not to leave the orchard while he was asleep."

"I do not believe it," said the Jay. "He is a false scoundrel, and I dare say Kapchack never gave any such order, and never thought about it. However, there is no help for it, we must break up this meeting, or we shall be missed. But it is clear that something must be done."

"Something must be done," said the wood-pigeon, as he flew off.

"Something must be done," repeated the dove.

"Something must be done," said the Owl, as he went down into the pollard to sleep the rest of the day. Off went the Mouse as fast as he could go, anxious to get away from the neighbourhood of the Weasel. The missel-thrush had started directly he heard what the Woodpecker said, disgusted that there was no action, and nothing but talk. The Jay went off with the Hawk, remarking as he went that he had expected better things of the Fox, whose royal ancestors had so great a reputation, and could contrive a scheme to achieve anything, while their ignoble descendant was so quiet, and scarce spoke a word. It seemed as if the Weasel would soon outdo him altogether. The Rook flew straight away to the flock to which he belonged, to tell them all that had been said. The Chaffinch left at the same time; the Fox and the Stoat went away together; the Crow and the Jackdaw accompanied each other a little way. When they had gone a short distance the Crow said he wanted to say something very particular, so they perched together on a lonely branch.

"What is it?" said Cloctaw.

"The fact is," said the Crow, "my belief is—come a little nearer—my belief is that Kapchack's

reign is coming to an end. People won't put up with this."

"Ah," said the Jackdaw, "if that is the case who is to be king?"

"Well," said the Crow, "let me whisper to you; come a little nearer." He hopped towards Cloctaw. Cloctaw hopped the other way. The Crow hopped towards him again, till Cloctaw came to the end of the branch, and could go no further without flying, which would look odd under the circumstances. So he kept a very sharp eye on Kauc, for the fact was they had had many a quarrel when they were younger, and Cloctaw was not at all sure that he should not have a beak suddenly driven through his head.

"The truth is," said the Crow, in a hoarse whisper, "there's a chance for you and me. Can't you see the Fox is very stupid, quite abject, and without the least spirit; the Stoat is very fierce, but has no mind; everybody suspects the Weasel, and will not trust him; as for the Rat, he is no favourite; the Hawk is—well, the Hawk is dangerous, but might be disposed of ('You black assassin,' thought Cloctaw to himself); the Rook has

not a chance, for his friends would be too jealous to let one of their number become a king; and for the rest, they are too weak. There's only you and me left."

"I see," said Cloctaw; "but we could not both be king."

"Why not?" said the Crow; "you wear the crown and live in the palace; you are old, and it would be nice and comfortable; you have all the state and dignity, and I will do the work."

"It is very kind of you to propose it," said Cloctaw, as if considering. In his heart he thought, "Oh, yes, very convenient indeed; I am to wear the crown, and be pecked at by everybody, and *you* to do all the work—that is, to go about and collect the revenue, and be rich, and have all the power, while I have all the danger."

"It is quite feasible, I am sure," said the Crow; "especially if Prince Tchack-tchack continues his undutiful course, and if Choo Hoo should come up with his army."

"I must think about it," said Cloctaw; "we must not be too hasty."

"Oh, dear no," said the Crow, delighted to have

won over one important politician to his cause so easily; "we must wait and watch events. Of course this little conversation is quite private?"

"Perfectly private," said Cloctaw; and they parted.

The Crow had an appointment, and Cloctaw flew direct to the steeple. His nest was in the highest niche, just behind the image of St. Paul; and it was not only the highest, but the safest from intrusion, for there was no window near, and on account of some projections below, even a ladder could not be put up, so that it was quite inaccessible without scaffolding. This niche he discovered in his hot youth, when he won renown by his strength and courage: he chose it for his home, and defended it against all comers. He was now old and feeble, but his reputation as a leading politician, and his influence at the court of king Kapchack was too great for any to think of ousting him by force.

But the members of his family, in their extreme solicitude for his personal safety, frequently represented to him the danger he incurred in ascending so high. Should a wing fail him, how terrible the consequences! more especially for the race of which

he was so distinguished an ornament. Nor was there the least reason for his labouring to that elevation; with his reputation and influence, none would dare to meddle with him. There were many pleasant places not so exposed, as the gurgoyle, the leads, the angle of the roof, where he could rest without such an effort; and upon their part they would willingly assist him by collecting twigs for a new nest.

But Cloctaw turned a deaf ear to these kindly proposals, and could not be made to see the advantages so benevolently suggested. He would in no degree abate his dignity, his right, power, or position. He adhered to St. Paul. There he had built all his days, and there he meant to stay to the last, for having seen so much of the world, well he knew that possession is ten points of the law, and well he understood the envy and jealousy which dictated these friendly counsels.

At the same time, as the Fox and the Stoat were going though the fern, the Stoat said, "It appears to me that this is a very favourable opportunity for ruining the Weasel. Could we not make up some tale, and tell Kapchack how the Weasel asked us to a secret meeting, or something?"

Now the Fox had his own ideas, and he wanted to get rid of the Stoat. "Another time," he said, "another time, we will consider of it; but why waste such a capital chance as you have to-day?"

"Capital chance to-day?" said the Stoat; "what is it you mean?"

"Did you not see the Mouse?" said the Fox. "Did you not see how fat he was? And just think, he has a long and lonely road home; and it would be very easy to make a short cut (for he will not leave the hedges which are round about), and get in front of, and so intercept him. I should go myself, but I was out last night, and feel tired this afternoon."

"Oh, thank you," said the Stoat; "I'll run that way directly." And off he started, thinking to himself, "How silly the Fox has got, and how much he has fallen off from the ancient wisdom for which his ancestors were famous. Why ever did he not hold his tongue, and I should never have thought of the Mouse, and the Fox could have had him another day?"

But the fact was the Fox recollected that the Mouse had had a long start, and it was very doubtful if the Stoat could overtake him, and if

he did, most likely the Rat would come to meet his friend, and the Stoat would get the worst of the encounter.

However ill the Rat served the Mouse, however much he abused his superior strength, wreaking his temper on his weaker companion, still the Mouse clung to him all the more. On the other hand the Rat, ready enough to injure the Mouse himself, would allow no one else (unless with his permission) to touch his follower, wishing to reserve to himself a monopoly of tyranny.

So soon as the Stoat was out of sight, the Fox looked round to see that no one was near, and he said to a fly, "Fly, will you carry a message for me?"

"I am very busy," said the fly, "very busy indeed."

So the Fox went a little farther, and said to a humble-bee, "Humble-bee, will you carry a message for me?"

"I am just going home," said the humble-bee, and buzzed along.

So the Fox went a little farther, and said to a butterfly, "Beautiful butterfly, will you carry a

message for me?" But the disdainful butterfly did not even answer.

The Fox went a little farther, and met a tomtit. "Te-te," said he, addressing the tomtit by name, "will you carry a message for me?"

"What impudence!" said Te-te. "Mind your own business, and do not speak to gentlemen."

"I see how it is," said the Fox to himself, "the fortunes of my family are fallen, and I am disregarded. When we were rich, and had a great reputation, and were the first of all the people in the wood, then we had messengers enough, and they flew to do our bidding. But now, they turn aside. This is very bitter. When I get home, I must curl round and think about it; I cannot endure this state of things. How dreadful it is to be poor! I wish we had not dissipated our wealth so freely. However, there is a little left still in a secret corner. As I said, I must see about it. Here is a gnat. 'Gnat, will you carry a message for me?'"

"Well, I don't know," said the gnat; "I must think about it. Will to-morrow do?"

"No," said the Fox quickly, before the gnat

flew off. "Go for me to Kapchack, and say there has been a secret——"

"A secret?" said the gnat; "that's another matter." And he went down closer to the Fox.

"Yes," said the Fox, "you fly as fast as you can, and whisper to Kapchack—you have free admittance, I know, to the palace—that there has been a secret meeting in the copse about his love affair, and that the courtiers are all against it, and are bent on his destruction, especially the Owl, the Hawk, the Crow, the Rook, the Weasel (the Weasel worst of all, for they would have chosen him as their deputy), the Stoat, and the Jackdaw, and that he has only one true friend, the Fox, who sends the message."

"All right!" said the gnat; "all right, I'll go!" And off he flew, delighted to be entrusted with so great a secret.

While the courtiers were thus intriguing, not only against Kapchack, but against each other, Bevis and the Squirrel went back into the raspberries, and Bevis helped himself to the fruit that had ripened since yesterday.

"It seems to me," said Bevis, after he had

eaten as much as he could, "that they are all very wicked."

"So they are," said the Squirrel. "I am sorry to say they are rather treacherous, and I warned you not to believe all they said to you. I would not let them use my copse, but the fact is, if they are wicked, Kapchack is a hundred times more so. Besides, it is very hard on the Jay, who is an old acquaintance of mine—we often have a chat in the fir-trees—to have his dear, sweet, pretty lady stolen away from him by such a horrid old wretch, whose riches and crown have quite turned her head!"

"What a business it all is," said Bevis. "Everybody seems mixed up in it. And so it is true that Prince Tchack-tchack is also in love with the pretty jay?"

"Yes, that it is," said the Squirrel; "and, between you and me, I have seen her flirt with him desperately, in that very hawthorn bush he forced the missel-thrush to give up to him. And that is the reason he will not let Kapchack peck his eye out, as he is so vain, and likes to look nice."

"Let Kapchack peck his eye out! But Kapchack is his father. Surely his papa would not peck his eye out?"

"Oh, dear me!" said the Squirrel, "I almost let the secret out. Goodness! I hope nobody heard me. And pray Bevis, dear, don't repeat it — oh, pray don't!—or it will be sure to be traced to me. I wish I had never heard it. If I had not listened to that vile old Crow; if I had not been so curious, and overheard him muttering to himself, and suggesting doubts at night! Bevis, dear, don't you ever be curious, and don't you say a word."

The Squirrel was in a terrible fright, till Bevis promised not to repeat anything.

"But," said he, "you have not told me the secret."

"No," said the Squirrel, "but I very nearly did, and only just stopped in time. Why, if the trees heard it, they would pass it from one to the other in a moment. Dear, dear!" He sat down, he was so frightened he could not frisk about. But Bevis stroked him down, and soothed him, and said he had the most lovely silky tail in the world, and this brought him to himself again.

"All this comes," said the Squirrel, "of my having run up the wrong side of the tree first this morning. Take care, Bevis dear, that you too do not make a mistake, and put the wrong foot first out of bed when you get up." Bevis laughed at this, and asked which was his wrong foot. "Well," said the Squirrel, "the fact is, it depends: sometimes it is one, and sometimes it is the other, and that is the difficulty, to know which it is, and makes all the difference in life. The very best woman I ever knew (and she was a farmer's wife) always, when she was out walking, put one foot before the other, and so was always right."

"Nonsense," said Bevis, "how could she walk without putting one foot before the other?"

"Oh, yes," said the Squirrel, "many people, though they think they put one foot before the other, really keep the wrong foot foremost all the time. But do you remember to-morrow morning when you get up."

"I do not see what difference it can make," said Bevis.

"If you put one foot out first," said the Squirrel, "it will very likely lead you to the looking-glass,

where you will see yourself and forget all the rest, and you will do one sort of thing that day; and if you put the other out first it will lead you to the window, and then you will see something, and you will think about that, and do another sort of thing; and if you put both feet out of bed together they will take you to the door, and there you will meet somebody, who will say something, and you will do another kind of thing. So you see it is a very important matter, and this woman, as I said, was the best that ever lived."

"No she wasn't," said Bevis, "she was not half so good as my mother is."

"That is true dear," said the Squirrel, "your mother is the very best of all. But don't forget about your feet to-morrow morning, dear."

"Look up," said Bevis, "and tell me what bird that is."

The Squirrel looked up, and saw a bird going over at a great height. "That is a peewit," he said. "He is a messenger; you can see how fast and straight he is flying. He is bringing some news, I feel sure, about Choo Hoo. Kapchack sent an out-post of peewits over the hills to watch Choo Hoo's move-

ments, and to let him know directly if he began to gather his army together. Depend upon it dear, there is some very important news. I must tell the Woodpecker, and he will find out; he is very clever at that." The Squirrel began to get restless, though he did not like to tell Bevis to go.

"You promised to tell me about Choo Hoo," said Bevis.

"So I did," said the Squirrel, "and if you will come to-morrow I will do so; I am rather in a hurry just now."

"Very well," said Bevis, "I will come to-morrow. Now show me the way to the felled tree." As they were going Bevis recollected the Weasel, and asked if he was really so ill he could not move, but was obliged to lick his paw to cure the pain.

The Squirrel laughed. "No," he whispered, "Don't you say I said so: the truth is the Weasel is as well as you or I, and now the council is broken up I daresay he is running about as quickly as he likes. And, Bevis dear, stoop down and I'll tell you (Bevis stooped) the fact is he was at the council all the time."

"But I never saw him," said Bevis, "and he never said anything."

"No," whispered the Squirrel very quietly, "he wanted to hear what they said without being present; he was in the elm all the time; you know dear, that malice-minded elm on the other side of the raspberries, which I told you was rotten inside. He lives there in that hole; there is a way into it level with the ground; that is his secret hiding place."

"I will bring my cannon-stick to-morrow," said Bevis, delighted to have discovered where the Weasel lived at last, "and I will shoot into the hole and kill him."

"I could not let you do that," said the Squirrel. "I do not allow any fighting, or killing, in my copse, and that is the reason all the birds and animals come here to hold their meetings, because they know it is a sanctuary. If you shoot off your cannon the birds are sure to hear it, and you will not be present at any more of their meetings, and you will not hear any more of the story. Therefore it would be very foolish of you to shoot off your cannon; you must wait, Bevis dear, till you can

catch the Weasel outside my copse, and then you may shoot him as much as you like."

"Very well," said Bevis, rather sulkily, "I will not shoot him in the hole if you do not want me to. But how could the Weasel have been in the elm all the time, when the Humble-bee said he found him lying in the sunshine on a bank licking his paw?"

"Why, of course he told the Humble-bee to say that."

"What a cheater he is, isn't he?" said Bevis. "And how did you find out where he lived? I looked everywhere for him, and so did Pan—Pan sniffed and sniffed, but could not find him."

"Nor could I," said the Squirrel. "After you shot the—I mean after the unfortunate business with the thrush, he kept out of the way, knowing that you had vowed vengeance against him, and although I go about a good deal, and peep into so many odd corners, I could not discover his whereabouts, till the little tree-climber told me. You know the tree-climber, dear, you have seen him in your orchard at home; he goes all round and round the trees, and listens at every chink, and so he learns

almost all the secrets. He heard the Weasel in the elm, and came at once and told me. Here is the timber, and there is the dragon-fly. Good afternoon, Bevis dear, come to-morrow, and you shall hear the peewit's news, and be sure and not forget to put the right foot out of bed first in the morning." Bevis kissed his hand to the Squirrel, and went home with the dragon-fly.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EMPEROR CHOO HOO.

When he woke next morning, Bevis quite forgot what the Squirrel had told him; he jumped out of bed without thinking, and his right foot touched the floor first, and led him to the window. From the window he saw the Brook, and recollected that the Brook had promised to tell him what he was singing, so as soon as ever he could get out of doors away he went through the gateway the grasshopper had shown him, and down to the hatch. Instead of coming quietly on tip-toe, as the Brook had told him, he danced up, and the kingfisher heard him, and went off as before, whistling "weep, weep." Bevis stood on the brink and said, "Brook, Brook, what are you singing? You promised to tell me what you were saying."

The Brook did not answer, but went on singing. Bevis listened a minute, and then he picked a willow leaf and threw it into the bubbles, and watched it

go whirling round and round in the eddies, and back up under the fall, where it dived down, and presently came up again, and the stream took it and carried it away past the flags. "Brook, Brook," said Bevis, stamping his foot, "tell me what you are singing."

And the Brook, having now finished that part of his song, said, "Bevis dear, sit down in the shadow of the willow, for it is very hot to-day, and the reapers are at work; sit down under the willow, and I will tell you as much as I can remember."

"But the Reed said you could not remember anything," said Bevis, leaning back against the willow.

"The Reed did not tell you the truth, dear; indeed, he does not know all; the fact is, the reeds are so fond of talking that I scarcely ever answer them now, or they would keep on all day long, and I should never hear the sound of my own voice, which I like best. So I do not encourage them, and that is why the reeds think I do not recollect."

"And what is it that you sing about?" said Bevis, impatiently.

"My darling," said the Brook, "I do not know

myself always what I am singing about. I am so happy I sing, sing, and never think about what it means; it does not matter what you mean as long as you sing. Sometimes I sing about the sun, who loves me dearly, and tries all day to get at me through the leaves and the green flags that hide me; he sparkles on me everywhere he can, and does not like me to be in the shadow. Sometimes I sing to the Wind, who loves me next most dearly, and will come to me everywhere, in places where the sun cannot get. He plays with me whenever he can, and strokes me softly, and tells me the things he has heard in the woods and on the hills, and sends down the leaves to float along, for he knows I like something to carry. Fling me in some leaves, Bevis, dear.

"Sometimes I sing to the earth and the grass; they are fond of me, too, and listen the best of all. I sing loudest at night, to the stars, for they are so far away they would not otherwise hear me."

"But what do you say?" said Bevis; but the Brook was too occupied now to heed him, and went on.

"Sometimes I sing to the trees; they, too, are fond of me, and come as near as they can; they

would all come down close to me if they could. They love me like the rest, because I am so happy, and never cease my chaunting. If I am broken to pieces against a stone, I do not mind in the least; I laugh just the same, and even louder. When I come over the hatch, I dash myself to fragments; and sometimes a rainbow comes and stays a little while with me. The trees drink me, and the grass drinks me, the birds come down and drink me; they splash me, and are happy. The fishes swim about, and some of them hide in deep corners. Round the bend I go, and the osiers say they never have enough of me. The long grass waves and welcomes me; the moorhens float with me; the kingfisher is always with me somewhere, and sits on the bough to see his ruddy breast in the water. And you come, too, Bevis, now and then to listen to me; and it is all because I am so happy."

"Why are you so happy?" said Bevis.

"I do not know," said the Brook. "Perhaps it is because all I think of is this minute; I do not know anything about the minute just gone by, and I do not care one bit about the minute that is just coming; all I care about is this minute, this very

minute now. Fling me in some more leaves, Bevis. Why do you go about asking questions, dear? Why don't you sing, and do nothing else?"

"Oh, but I want to know all about everything," said Bevis. "Where did you come from, and where are you going, and why don't you go on and let the ground be dry—why don't you run on, and run all away? Why are you always here?"

The Brook laughed, and said, "My dear, I do not know where I came from, and I do not care at all where I am going. What does it matter, my love? All I know is I shall come back again; yes, I shall come back again." The Brook sang very low, and rather sadly now, "I shall go into the sea, and shall be lost; and even you would not know me—ask your father, love, he has sailed over the sea in the ships that come to Southampton, and I was close to him, but he did not know me. But by-and-by, when I am in the sea, the sun will lift me up, and the clouds will float along—look towards the hills, Bevis dear, every morning, and you will see the clouds coming and bringing me with them; and the rain and the dew, and sometimes the thunder and the lightning, will put me down again,

and I shall run along here and sing to you, my sweet, if you will come and listen. Fling in some little twigs, my dear, and some bits of bark from the tree."

Then the Brook sang very low and very sad, and said, "I shall come back again, Bevis; I always come back, and I am always happy; and yet I do not know either if I am really happy when I am singing so joyously. Bevis, dear, try and think and tell me. Am I really happy, Bevis? Tell me, dear; you can see the sun sparkling on me, and the Wind stroking me, just as he strokes your hair (he told me he was very fond of you, and meant to tell you a story some day), and the reeds whispering, and the willows drooping over me, and the bright kingfisher; you can hear me singing, Bevis, now am I happy?"

"I do not know," said Bevis; "sometimes you sound very happy, but just now you sound very sad. Stop a little while and think about it."

"Oh, no, Bevis; I cannot stop, I must keep running. Nothing can stop, dear: the trees cannot stop growing, they must keep on growing till they die; and then they cannot stop decaying, till they

are all quite gone; but they come back again. Nor can you stop, Bevis, dear."

"I will stop," said Bevis.

"You cannot," said the Brook.

"But I will."

"You cannot. You are a very clever boy, Bevis, but you cannot stop; nor can your papa, nor anybody, you must keep on. Let me see, let me think. I remember, I have seen you before; it was so many, many thousand years ago, but I am almost sure it was you. Now I begin to think about it, I believe I have seen you two or three times, Bevis; but it was before the hippopotamus used to come and splash about in me. I cannot be quite certain, for it is a long time to remember your face, dear."

"I do not believe it," said Bevis; "you are babbling, Brook. My mamma says you babble—it is because you are so old. I am sure I was not born then."

"Yes, you were, dear; and I daresay you will come back again, when all the hills are changed and the roads are covered with woods, and the houses gone. I daresay you will come back and splash in me, like the blackbirds."

"Now you are talking nonsense; you silly Brook," said Bevis, "the hills will never change; and the roads will always be here, and the houses will not be gone; but why are you sighing, you dear old Brook?"

"I am sighing, my love, because I remember."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember, before the hills were like they are now; I remember when I was a broad deep river; I remember the stars that used to shine in me, and they are all gone, you cannot see them now, Bevis ("Pooh," said Bevis); I remember the stories the lions used to tell me when they came down to drink; I remember the people dancing on the grass by me, and sing, singing, they used to sing like me, Bevis, without knowing what it was they sung, and without any words (not stupid songs, Bevis, like your people sing now) but I understood them very well. I cannot understand the songs the folk sing now, the folk that live now have gone away so far from me."

"What nonsense you say, old Brook; why we live quite close, and the waggons go over your bridge every day."

"I remember" (the Brook took no notice, but went on) "I remember them very well, and they loved

me dearly too; they had boats, Bevis, made out of trees, and they floated about on me."

"I will have a boat," said Bevis, "and float about on you."

"And they played music, which was just like my singing, and they were very happy, because as I told you about myself, they did not think about the minute that was coming, or the minute that had gone by, they only thought about This Minute."

"How long was that ago?" said Bevis.

"Oh," said the Brook, "I daresay your papa would tell you it was thousands upon thousands of years, but that is not true, dear; it was only a second or two since."

"I shall not stay to listen much longer, silly Brook, if you talk like that; why it must be longer than that, or I should have seen it."

"My dear," said the Brook, "That which has gone by, whether it happened a second since, or a thousand thousand years since, is just the same; there is no real division betwixt you and the past. You people who live now have made up all sorts of stupid, very stupid stories, dear; I hope you will not believe them; they tell you about time and all that.

Now there is no such thing as time, Bevis my love; there never was any time, and there never will be; the sun laughs at it, even when he marks it on the sun-dial. Yesterday was just a second ago, and so was ten thousand years since, and there is nothing between you and then; there is no wall between you and then—nothing at all, dear,"—and the Brook sang so low and thoughtfully that Bevis could not catch what he said, but the tune was so sweet, and soft, and sad that it made him keep quite still. While he was listening the kingfisher came back and perched on the hatch, and Bevis saw his ruddy neck and his blue wings.

"There is nothing between you and then," the Brook began again, "nothing at all dear, only some stories which are not true; if you will not believe me, look at the sun, but you cannot look at the sun, darling; it shines so bright. It shines just the same, as bright and beautiful; and the Wind blows as sweet as ever, and I sparkle and sing just the same, and you may drink me if you like; and the grass is just as green; and the stars shine at night. Oh, yes, Bevis dear, *we* are all here just the same, my love, and all things are as bright and beautiful

as ten thousand times ten thousand years ago, which is no longer since than a second.

"But your people have gone away from us—that is their own fault. I cannot think why they should do so; they have gone away from us, and they are no longer happy, Bevis; they cannot understand our songs,—they sing stupid songs they have made up themselves, and which they did not learn of us, and then because they are not happy, they say "The world is growing old." But it is not true, Bevis, the world is not old, it is as young as ever it was. Fling me a leaf—and now another. Do not you forget me, Bevis; come and see me now and then, and throw twigs to me and splash me."

"That I will," said Bevis; and he picked up a stone and flung it into the water with such a splash that the kingfisher flew away, but the Brook only laughed, and told him to throw another, and to make haste and eat the peck of salt, and grow bigger and jump over him. "That I will," said Bevis, "I am very hungry now—good morning, I am going home to dinner."

"Good morning dear," said the Brook, "you will always find me here when you want to hear a

song." Bevis went home to dinner humming the tune the Brook had taught him, and by-and-by, when the hot sun had begun to sink a little, he started again for the copse, and as before, the dragon-fly met him, and led him to the timber, and from there to the raspberries.

The Squirrel was waiting for him on a bough of the oak, and while Bevis picked the fruit that had ripened since yesterday, told him the news the peewits had brought about the great rebel Choo Hoo. A party of the peewits, who had been watching ever so far away, thought they saw a stir and a movement in the woods; and presently, out came one of the captains of the wood-pigeons with two hundred of his soldiers, and they flew over the border into king Kapchack's country, and began to forage in one of his wheat-fields, where the corn was ripe. When they saw this, the peewits held a council on the hill, and they sent a messenger to Kapchack with the news. While they were waiting for him to return, some of the wood-pigeons having foraged enough, went home to the woods, so that there was not much more than half of them left.

Seeing this—for his soldiers who were wheeling

about in the air came and told him—the captain of the peewits thought, "Now is my time! This is a most lucky and fortunate circumstance, and I can now win the high approval of king Kapchack, and obtain promotion. The captain of the wood-pigeons has no idea how many of us are watching his proceedings, for I have kept my peewits behind the cover of the hill so that he could not count them, and he has allowed half of the wood-pigeons to go home. We will rush down upon the rest, and so win an easy victory."

So saying he flew up, and all the peewits followed him in the expectation of an easy conquest. But, just as they were descending upon the wheat-field, up flew the wood-pigeons with such a terrible clangour of their strong wings, and facing towards them, showed such a determination to fight to the last breath, that the peewits, who were never very celebrated for their courage, turned tail, and began to retreat.

They would still have reached the hills in good order, and would have suffered no great disgrace (for they were but a small party, and not so numerous as the wood-pigeons), but in the midst of these

manœuvres, the lieutenant of the pigeons, who had gone home with those who had done foraging, flew out from the wood with his men, and tried by a flank movement to cut off the peewits' retreat. At this they were so alarmed they separated and broke up their ranks, each flying to save himself as best he might. Nor did they stop till long after the wood-pigeons, being cautious and under complete control, had ceased to pursue; not till they had flown back two or three miles into the fastnesses of Kapchack's hills. Then some of them collecting again, held a hurried council, and sent off messengers with the news of this affray.

About the same time, it happened that a missel-thrush arrived at the court, a son of the favourite missel-thrush, the only bird whom Kapchack (and the farmer) allowed to build in the orchard. The missel-thrush had just travelled through part of the country which once belonged to Kapchack, but which Choo Hoo had over-run the year before, and he brought Kapchack such a terrible account of the mighty armies that he saw assembling, that the king was beside himself with terror. Next came a crow, one of Kauc's warriors, who had been that

way, and he said that two captains of the wood-pigeons, hearing of the peewits' defeat, had already, and without staying for instructions from Choo Hoo, entered the country and taken possession of a copse on the slope of the hill from which the peewits had descended.

"And," said the Squirrel, as Bevis having eaten all the raspberries, came and sat down on the moss under the oak, "the upshot of it is that king Kapchack has called a general council of war, which is to be held almost directly at the Owl's castle, in the pollard hard by. For you must understand that the farmer who lives near Kapchack's palace is so fierce, he will not let any of the large birds (except the favourite missel-thrush) enter the orchard, and therefore Kapchack has to hold these great councils in the copse. What will be the result I cannot think, and I am not without serious apprehensions myself, for I have hitherto held undisputed possession of this domain. But Choo Hoo is so despotic, and has such an immense army at his back, that I am not at all certain he will respect my neutrality. As for Kapchack, he shivers in his claws at the very name of the mighty rebel."

"Why does Choo Hoo want king Kapchack's country?" said Bevis. "Why cannot he stop where he is?"

"There is no reason, dear; but you know that all the birds and animals would like to be king if they could, and when Choo Hoo found that the wood-pigeons (for he was nothing but an adventurer at first, without any title or property except the ancestral ash) were growing so numerous that the woods would hardly hold them, and were continually being increased both by their own populousness and by the arrival of fresh bands, it occurred to him that this enormous horde of people, if they could only be persuaded to follow him, could easily overrun the entire country. Hitherto, it was true, they had been easily kept in subjection, notwithstanding their immense numbers, first, because they had no leaders among them, nor even any nobles or rich people to govern their movements and tell them what to do; and next, because they were barbarians, and totally destitute of art or refinement, knowledge, or science, neither had they any skill in diplomacy or politics, but were utterly outside the civilized nations.

"Even their language, as you yourself have heard, is very contracted and poor, without inflection or expression, being nothing but the repetition of the same sounds, by which means—that is simply by the number and the depth or hollowness of the same monosyllables—they convey their wishes to each other. It is, indeed, wonderful how they can do so, and our learned men, from this circumstance, have held that the language of the wood-pigeon is the most difficult to acquire, so much so that it is scarce possible for one who has not been born among the barbarians to attain to any facility in the use of these gutturals. This is the reason why little or no intercourse has ever taken place between us who are civilised and these hordes; that which has gone on has been entirely conducted by the aid of interpreters, being those few wood-pigeons who have come away from the main body, and dwell peaceably in our midst.

"Now, Choo Hoo, as I said, being an adventurer, with no more property than the ancestral ash, but a pigeon of very extraordinary genius, considered within himself, that if any one could but persuade these mighty and incredible myriads to follow him he could overrun the entire country. The very absence of any

nobles or rich pigeons among them would make his sway the more absolute if he once got power, for there would be none to dispute it, or to put any check upon him. Ignorant and barbarous as they were, the common pigeons would worship such a captain as a hero and a demi-god, and would fly to certain destruction in obedience to his orders.

"He was the more encouraged to the enterprise because it was on record that in olden times great bodies of pigeons had passed across the country sweeping everything before them. Nothing could resist their onward march, and it is owing to these barbarian invasions that so many of our most precious chronicles have been destroyed, and our early history, Bevis dear, involved in obscurity. Their dominion—destructive as it was—had, however, always passed away as rapidly as it arose, on account of the lack of cohesion in their countless armies. They marched without a leader, and without order, obeying for a time a common impulse; when that impulse ceased they retired tumultuously, suffering grievous losses from the armies which gathered behind and hung upon their rear. Their bones whitened the fields, and the sun, it is said, was darkened at noonday by their

hastening crowds fleeing in dense columns, and struck down as they fled by hawks and crows.

"Had they possessed a leader in whom they felt confidence the result might have been very different; indeed, our wisest historians express no doubt that civilisation must have been entirely extinguished, and these lovely fields and delicious woods have been wholly occupied by the barbarians. Fortunately it was not so. But, as I said, Choo Hoo, retiring to the top of a lofty fir-tree, and filled with these ideas, surveyed from thence the masses of his countrymen returning to the woods to roost as the sun declined, and resolved to lose no time in endeavouring to win them to his will, and to persuade them to embark upon the extraordinary enterprise which he had conceived.

"Without delay he proceeded to promulgate his plans, flying from tribe to tribe, and from flock to flock, ceaselessly proclaiming that the kingdom was the wood-pigeons' by right, by reason of their numbers, and because of the wickedness of Kapchack and his court, which wickedness was notorious, and must end in disaster. As you may imagine, he met with little or no response—for the most part the pigeons, being

of a stolid nature, went on with their feeding and talking, and took no notice whatever of his orations. After a while the elder ones, indeed, began to say to each other that this agitator had better be put down and debarred from freedom of speech, for such seditious language must ultimately be reported to Kapchack, who would send his body-guards of hawks among them and exact a sanguinary vengeance.

"Finding himself in danger, Choo Hoo, not one whit abashed, instead of fleeing, came before the elders and openly reproached them with misgovernment, cowardice, and the concealment or loss of certain ancient prophecies, which foretold the future power of the wood-pigeons, and which he accused them of holding back out of jealousy, lest they should lose the miserable petty authority they enjoyed on account of their age. Now, whether there were really any such prophecies, I cannot tell you, or whether it was one of Choo Hoo's clever artifices, it is a moot point among our most learned antiquaries; the Owl, who has the best means of information, told me once that he believed there was some ground for the assertion.

"At any rate it suited Choo Hoo's purpose very well; for although the elders and the heads of the

tribes forthwith proceeded to subject him to every species of persecution, and attacked him so violently that he lost nearly all his feathers, the common pigeons sympathised with him, and hid him from their pursuit. They were the more led to sympathise with him because, on account of their ever-increasing numbers, the territory allotted to them by Kapchack was daily becoming less and less suited to their wants, and in short, there were some signs of a famine. They, therefore, looked with longing eyes at the fertile country, teeming with wheat and acorns around them, and listened with greedy ears to the tempting prospect so graphically described by Choo Hoo.

"Above all, the young pigeons attached themselves to his fortunes and followed him everywhere in concontinually increasing bands, for he promised them wives in plenty and trees for their nests without number; for all the trees in their woods were already occupied by the older families, who would not moreover, part with their daughters to young pigeons who had not a branch to roost on. Some say that the Fox, who has long been deeply discontented at the loss of his ancestors' kingdom and of his own wealth which he dissipated so carelessly, did not scruple to

advise Choo Hoo how to proceed. Be that as it may, I should be the last to accuse any one of disloyalty without evident proof; be that as it may, the stir and commotion grew so great among the wood-pigeons, that presently the news of it reached king Kapchack.

"His spies, of whom he has so many (the chief of them is Te-te, the tomtit of whom I bid you beware) brought him full intelligence of what was going on. Kapchack lost no time in calling his principal advisers around him; they met close by here (where the council is to take place this afternoon) for he well knew the importance of the news. It was not only you see, the immense numbers of the wood-pigeons and the impossibility of resisting their march, were they once set in motion, but he had to consider that there was a considerable population of pigeons in our midst who might turn traitors, and he was by no means sure of the allegiance of various other tribes, who were only held down by terror.

"The council fully acknowledged the gravity of the situation, and upon the advice of the Hawk it was resolved that Choo Hoo, as the prime mover

of the trouble, and as the only one capable of bringing matters to a crisis, should be forthwith despatched. But when the executioners proceeded to seize him he eluded their clutches with the greatest ease; for his followers (such was their infatuation) devoted their lives to his, and threw themselves in the way of Kapchack's emissaries, the hawks, submitting to be torn in pieces rather than see their beloved hero lose a feather. Thus baffled, the enraged Kapchack next tried to get him assassinated, but as before, his friends watched about him with such solicitude, that no one could enter the wood where he slept at night without their raising such a disturbance that their evil purpose was defeated.

"In his rage Kapchack ordered a decimation of the wood-pigeons, which I myself think was a great mistake; but as I have told you before, I do not meddle with politics. Still I cannot help thinking that if he had, instead, of his royal bounty and benevolence, given the wood-pigeons an increase of territory, seeing how near they sometimes came to a famine, that they would have been disarmed and their discontent turned to gratitude; but he ordered in his rage and terror that they should be decimated,

and let loose the whole army of his hawks upon them, so that the slaughter was awful to behold, and the ground was strewn with their torn and mangled bodies. Yet they remained faithful to Choo Hoo, and not one traitor was found amongst these loyal barbarians.

"But Choo Hoo, deeply distressed in mind, said that he would relieve them from the burden of his presence rather than thus be the cause of their sorrow. He therefore left those provinces and flew out of the country, leaving word behind him that he would never return till he had seen the Raven, and recovered from him those ancient prophecies that had so long been lost. He flew away, and disappeared in the distance; the days and weeks passed, but he did not return, and at last Kapchack, relieved of his apprehensions, recalled his murderous troops, and the pigeons were left in peace to lament their Choo Hoo.

"A twelvemonth passed, and still Choo Hoo did not come; the people said he had been called to the happy Forest of the Heroes, and averred that sometimes they heard his voice calling to them when no one was near. There was no doubt that he had gone

with the Raven. The Raven you must know, my dear Sir Bevis, was once the principal judge and arbiter of justice amongst us, so much so that he was above kings, and it is certain that had he been here we should not have had to submit to the sanguinary tyranny of Kapchack, nor condemned to witness the scandalous behaviour of his court, or the still greater scandal of his own private life. But for some reason the Raven mysteriously left this country about a hundred years ago, leaving behind him certain prophecies, some of which no doubt you have heard, especially that upon his return there will be no more famine, nor frost, nor slaughter, nor conflict, but we shall all live together in peace.

"However that may be, the Raven has never come back; the learned hold that he must have died long since, for he was so aged when he went away no one knew his years, hinting in their disbelief that he went away to die, and so surround his death with a halo of mystery; but the common people are quite of a different opinion, and strenuously uphold the belief that he will some day return. Well, as I told you, a twelvemonth went by, and Choo Hoo did not come, when suddenly in the spring (when

Kapchack himself was much occupied in his palace, and most of his spies were busy with their nests, and the matter had almost been forgotten) Choo Hoo re-appeared, bringing with him the most beautiful young bride that was ever beheld, as he himself was, on the other hand, the strongest and swiftest of the wood-pigeons.

"When this was known (and the news spread in a minute) the enthusiasm of the barbarians knew no bounds. Notwithstanding it was nesting-time, they collected in such vast numbers that the boughs cracked with their weight; they unanimously proclaimed Choo Hoo emperor (for they disdained the title of king as not sufficiently exalted) and declared their intention, as soon as the nesting-time was over, and the proper season—the autumn—for campaigning arrived, of following him, and invading the kingdom of Kapchack.

"Choo Hoo told them that, after many months of wandering, he had at last succeeded in finding the Raven; at least he had not seen the Raven himself, but the Raven had sent a special messenger, the hawfinch, to tell him to be of good cheer, and to return to the wood-pigeons, and to lead them forth against

Kapchack, who tottered upon his throne; and that he (the Raven) would send the night-jar, or goat-sucker, with crooked and evil counsels to confound Kapchack's wisdom. And indeed, Bevis, my dear, I have myself seen several night-jars about here, and I am rather inclined to think that there is some truth in this part at least of what Choo Hoo says; for it is an old proverb, which I daresay you have heard, that when the gods design the destruction of a monarch they first make him mad, and what can be more mad than Kapchack's proposed marriage with the jay, to which he was doubtless instigated by the night-jars, who, like genii of the air, have been floating in the dusky summer twilight round about his palace.

"And they have, I really believe, confounded his council and turned his wisdom to folly; for Kapchack has been so cunning for so many many years, and all his family have been so cunning, and all his councillors, that now I do believe (only I do not meddle with politics) that this extreme cunning is too clever, and that they will overreach themselves. However, we shall see what is said at the council by-and-by.

"Choo Hoo having told the pigeons this, added that he had further been instructed by the Raven to give them a sacred and mystic pass-word and rallying cry; he did not himself know what it meant, it was, however something very powerful, and by it they would be led to victory. So saying, he called 'Koos-takke!' and at once the vast assembly seized the signal and responded 'Koos-takke!' which mystic syllables are now their war-cry, their call of defiance, and their welcome to their friends. You may often hear them shouting these words in the depths of the woods; Choo Hoo learnt them in the enchanted Forest of Savernake, where, as everyone knows, there are many mighty magicians, and where, perhaps, the Raven is still living in its deep recesses. Now this war-cry supplied, as doubtless the Raven had foreseen, the very link that was wanting to bind the immense crowd of wood-pigeons together. Thenceforward they had a common sign and pass-word, and were no longer scattered.

"In the autumn Choo Hoo crossed the border with a vast horde, and although Kapchack sent his generals, who inflicted enormous losses, such as no other nation but the barbarians could have sustained, nothing

could stay the advance of such incredible numbers. After a whole autumn and winter of severe and continued fighting, Choo Hoo, early in the next year found that he had advanced some ten (and in places fifteen) miles, giving his people room to feed and move. He had really pushed much further than that, but he could not hold all the ground he had taken for the following reason: In the spring, as the soft warm weather came, and the sun began to shine, and the rain to fall, and the brook to sing more sweetly, and the wind to breathe gently with delicious perfume, and the green leaves to come forth, the barbarians began to feel the influence of love.

"They could no longer endure to fly in the dense column, they no longer obeyed the voice of their captain. They fell in love, and each marrying set about to build a nest, free and unmolested in those trees that Choo Hoo had promised them. Choo Hoo himself retired with his lovely bride to the ancestral ash, and passed the summer in happy dalliance. With the autumn the campaign recommenced, and with exactly the same result. After a second autumn and winter of fighting, Choo Hoo had pushed his fron-

tier another fifteen miles further into Kapchack's kingdom. Another summer of love followed, and so it went on year after year, Choo Hoo's forces meantime continually increasing in numbers, since there were now no restrictions as to nest trees, but one and all could marry.

"Till at last he has under his sway a horde of trained warriors, whose numbers defy calculation, and he has year by year pushed into Kapchack's territory till now it seems as if he must utterly overwhelm and destroy that monarch. This he would doubtless have achieved ere now, but there is one difficulty which has considerably impeded his advance, as he came farther and farther from his native province. This difficulty is water.

"For in the winter, when the Longpond is frozen, and the brook nearly covered with ice, and all the ponds and ditches likewise, so vast a horde cannot find enough to satisfy their thirst, and must consequently disperse. Were it not for this Choo Hoo must ere now have overwhelmed us. As it is, Kapchack shivers in his claws, and we all dread the approaching autumn, for Choo Hoo has now approached so near as to be at our very doors. If he only knew one

thing he would have no difficulty in remaining here and utterly destroying us."

"What is that?" said Bevis.

"Will you promise faithfully not to tell anyone?" said the Squirrel, "for my own existence depends upon this horde of barbarians being kept at bay; for you see should they pass over they will devour every thing in the land, and there will certainly be a famine—the most dreadful that has ever been seen."

"I will promise," said Bevis, "I promise you faithfully."

"Then I will tell you," went on the Squirrel:

"In this copse of mine there is a spring of the clearest and sweetest water (you shall see it, I will take you to it some day) which is a great secret, for it is so hidden by ferns and fir-trees over-hanging it, that no one knows anything about it except Kapchack, myself, the Weasel, and the Fox; I wish the Weasel did not know, for he is so gluttonous for blood, which makes him thirsty, that he is continually dipping his murderous snout into the delicious water.

"Now this spring being so warm in the fern,

and coming out of ground which is, in a manner, warm too, of all the springs in this province does not freeze, but always runs clear all the winter. If Choo Hoo only knew it, don't you see, he could stay in Kapchack's country, no matter how hard the frost, and his enormous army, whose main object is plunder, would soon starve us altogether. But he does not know of it.

"He has sent several of his spies, the woodcocks, to search the country for such a spring, but although they are the most cunning of birds at that trick, they have not yet succeeded in finding my spring and thrusting their long bills into it. They dare not come openly, but fly by night, for Kapchack's hawks are always hovering about; well enough he knows the importance of this secret, and they would pay for their temerity with their lives if they were seen. All I am afraid of is lest the Weasel or the Fox, in their eagerness for empire, should betray the secret to Choo Hoo.

"The Fox, though full of duplicity, and not to be depended upon, is at least brave and bold, and so far as I can judge his character would not, for his own sake (hoping some day to regain the kingdom) let

out this secret. But of the Weasel I am not so sure; he is so very wicked, and so cunning, no one can tell what he may do. Thus it is that in the highest of my beech trees I do not feel secure, but am in continual fear lest a wood-cock should steal in, or the Weasel play the traitor, for if so a famine is imminent, and that is why I support, so far as I can without meddling with politics, the throne of Kapchack, as the last barrier against this terrible fate.

"Even now could he but be brought to reform his present life something might be hoped for, for he has a powerful army; but, as you have seen, this affair with the jay has caused ambitious ideas to spring up in the minds of his chief courtiers, some of whom (especially I think the Crow and the Weasel) are capable of destroying a country for their private and personal advantage. Therefore it is that I look forward to this council, now about to be held, with intense anxiety, for upon it will depend our future, the throne of Kapchack, our existence or destruction. And here comes the Rook; the first as usual."

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